

Searching for Mist

by Githara

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Summary: Okita Souji is dying. Not the glorious death he imagined as a warrior but a slow progressing illness chiseling away at him. In what seems to be his last days, a mysterious woman appears, knowing too much about him, his friends and his illness, he searches for her. He needs answers, maybe he needs more than answers. What will he find? Okita S x OC. Rated M for later Chapters.

1. Chapter 1 - Prologue

I don't own Hakuouki Shinsengumi Kitan or any material related to it.

Prologue

The bloody corpse lay crumpled on the ground before him, Okita Souji gave his attacker a last hard kick before an evil grin crossed his face.

"Seen better days, have we?" he chortled before uncontrollable coughs started wracking his chest and abdomen. The coughs grew more severe and soon Okita was on his knees, blood flowing freely from his mouth, chest burning like it was on fire, his eyes turning watery with strain.

_It is getting worse, everyday this disease is taking me bit by bit, I don't want to die like this__._

His coughs had drowned out the sound of the approaching foot falls, when Okita finally noticed them, they were already close enough to unsheathe their katanas, the silent hiss of steel against leather accompanied by a chuckle.

"Shit" was all he could utter before the coughs came again. _I might die sooner than I thought__.

>Very willing to take advantage of Okita's compromised position

they were treading closer, no effort to be silent, eagerness gleamed in their eyes, they wanted the blood of a Shinsengumi. Okita could only watch through blurry eyes as his death came closer in the guise of two mediocre swordsmen waving their swords in the air like platoon standards.

__This isn't the glorious death I had hoped for___. He smirked inwardly as he thought of the irony in all of this. He could hear their breaths now, they were close, panting like hungry street mutts.

"Today is our lucky day Hoshi." the one man sneered, a bloodthirsty look in his eyes.

>"Seems so, my blade is thirsty for some wolf blood" the other said.
"Look at you, pathetic! On your knees ready to die!" both men laughed out loud, a badly aimed kick grazing Okita's ribs.

Suddenly the man on the left fell to the ground with a loud thud, dead. Okita saw no blood, but the man was dead for certain, his glassy eyes staring into nothingness. His partner whirled around scanning the area for the attacker, Okita imagined he looked quite comical with his panicked expression, aimlessly waving his sword at nothing. Not seeing any attacker, the man turned to his fallen comrade, tentatively checking for a pulse.

Okita, still coughing and on his knees, stared at the two men until he noticed a black shape coming from behind, it was fast, blurring as it seemed to nearly fly through the air, it connected with the still kneeling man's head, slamming his face and chest into the ground. Something glinted in the late afternoon sun, a tantÅ•, with lightning speed it came down. Stab. Blood. Shriek. Stab. The man was dead.

Silence followed the the attack, Okita was stunned by the speed of the assault, the swiftness of the man's death, he looked up, the setting sun and his watery eyes making it difficult to see his rescuer, or was it his attacker?

__At least I will be killed by a skilled warrior.__

A silvery laugh echoed through the empty street, a woman's laugh. "Don't worry yourself Shinsengumi-dono." the voice was rich and vibrant. "I am not a foe...I would be more worried about my illness if I was you." her voice dropped an octave or two, taking on a somber tone. "Tuberculosis does not go well with your lifestyle, you should take care of yourself."

The woman took a step back from Okita, stepping right into the setting sun, a bright halo forming around her shoulders. Her silhouette showed a shapely figure, perfect curves with long legs, he realised then that she did not wear a kimono but a tight fitting version of katabira. _What is this woman. Why does she wear armour? _Okita found himself wondering.

"Okita-san!" the shout came from afar, it was Heisuke's voice.

"Well that would be my cue to leave. Wipe your mouth before they get too close" she chuckled as she turned from him, a long ponytail and errant wisps of hair twirling with her. "...and take care." her voice

trailed off.

>"Wait" Okita croaked, but she had already headed off, he stared at her form for a while, Okita found himself mesmerised with her walk, her hips swaying as her silhouette sauntered away.<p>

"Okita-san! Are you alright?" Heisuke's voice broke his trance.

Slightly disoriented Okita rose with the help of his friend, discreetly wiping the blood from his mouth and chin as he rose. "This imbecile just caught me by surprise" he said grumpily as he nudged one of the men's bodies.

"Surprise? You getting old or something?" Heisuke teased him as he gave him a wide grin. "I have heard it happens to the best of us, getting old that is...I once heard this story from the old man at the baths..." Heisuke's chattering faded to a hum in Okita's mind as his thoughts returned to the mystery woman with the swaying hips.

He bent to carefully pick up a clearly poisoned shuriken from the ground. _So this is how you did it, but from that far?_ He looked at where she possibly would have been when throwing the deadly star, scanning the empty street, he could not see any good hiding spots close enough for himself to release an accurate throw. _She must be a good thrower. _He smiled to himself.

>But..who and what was she? Why did she help him? Would he see her again? What did she know about his disease? Questions tumbled into his thoughts, just to end without answers.

Brushing off Heisuke's teasing offer of a walking stick, Okita made his way back to their base, his mind reeling with questions.

2. Chapter 2 - Dreams and Secrets

I don't own the Hakuouki anime or any of it's characters.

****Chapter1****

He woke with a start, arms flailing, grabbing at nothing. His lungs were empty, no breath came to him until the painful burst of coughs erupted from his chest, it made him cringe and writhe in agony, still he was thankful for the air that came with the pain.

>He sat up, wiping blood from his mouth, pondering his most recent dream.<p>

She was there, again, long legs, a walk, an imagined smile, he could still hear her laugh echoing in his head, for days she had haunted him, sometimes saving him, sometimes not and on occasion he was the one doing the saving. She still had no name or face always just a dark ghostly outline with a beautiful, rich voice.

>When did I decide your voice is beautiful? He thought to himself.

Okita gingerly raised a hand to his face, he was feverish again and a slight layer of perspiration covered his brow.

>"Dammit, is this how it's going to be from now on?"he muttered dragging his pained body from his futon, a heavy sigh left his lips as he stood. Why are you constantly on my mind? Tying his Obi

he couldn't help but chuckle at himself. "Looking for a last wild fling Okita Souji?"

He shook his head knowing that it wasn't the answer, for some inexplicable reason he yearned to know her, more of this shadowy silhouette in his mind, her name, her face, he needed to know her. Why? He couldn't tell.

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He found himself searching for her every moment of the day, he scanned every road when on patrol, every corner when out with his friends, listened intently to every conversation just to hear her voice, he hoped to find her, even returning to where he had first met her more than once. He could not explain the obsession.

"You're a silly man Souji" he muttered to himself on the way to breakfast. "What has got into me?"

"I see the aging has affected your mind now!" Heisuke's voice pulled him from his musings. "You're even talking to yourself!" he grinned.

"Shut your mouth Heisuke-san" Okita grinned. "It's a sign of intelligence, it's the only good conversation around here."

Heisuke shot him a quick glance and burst into laughter. "Well at least age hasn't caught your tongue yet. Let's get a move on, I'm starving and curious about this new girl."

"New girl?" Okita asked with a raised eyebrow, his interest immediately piqued.

"Yes, Chizuru's cousin or was it friend...I can't remember. She arrived last night, she's staying here until she can return home, everything was washed away in the Ibaraki floods last week."

"Oh" was all Okita could muster as his mind raced. _Could it be her? Or is it a coincidence?_

Okita's pace increased as he rushed to see this woman, leaving Heisuke behind, slightly confused at his friend's haste. "I guess he must be hungry too" Heisuke shrugged looking on as Okita's shape quickly disappeared ahead of him.

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He nearly ripped the door from its rail, jerking it open in hope of seeing this girl. To his disappointment he only saw Sannan-san sitting at his regular place near the head of the dining table.

>"Okita? What's wrong?" Sannan asked worriedly when he saw Okita's tired face.
"Nothing." Okita smiled halfheartedly, obviously lying. "Just tired..."

>"Oh, are you having trouble sleeping?" Sannan asked with a raised eyebrow.
"You could say that." Okita sighed. "My dreams have been...vivid...to say the least."

Sannan leaned backwards, closely inspecting Okita's face, it was clear that he was thinking about all the possible reasons for Okita's

sleeping problems, then a slight smile graced his lips.
>"You know, some say our dreams reflect our thoughts and emotions, there are even those that believe they give a glimpse into our futures." Sannan chuckled. "I for one, am not such a romantic fool though"<p>

"You can say that again." Sanosuke Harada chimed as he came through the door. "Not a single romantic bone in that man's body." he grinned while pointing at Sannan. Harada and Okita both laughed, knowing the statement to be very true, they had all witnessed Sannan's disinterest in any kind of romance, many a girl left with a broken heart.

>"Harada-san." Sannan smiled. "Maybe I will make myself the perfect woman one day."
An awkward silence fell over the room, Sannan's preoccupation with the sciences and his constant experimenting had become a worry to many of the members of the Shinsengumi. He spent days locked up doing...whatever he did, no-one really wanted to ask what happened behind those doors.

Harada's stained laughter filled the room. "Now that my friend will never happen, there is no such thing as a perfect woman!"

"Lies! All lies!" Shinpachi Nagakura thundered as he burst into the room, nearly taking the already battered door with him. "All women are perfect, especially when they are not wearing anything" he laughed a hearty laugh and brutally smacked Okita on the back. "Don't you think Okita-san?"

>Okita could only nod as he tried to keep the newly awakened coughs under control, his chest ached and stars burst into his vision as he held his breath. Sannan gave Okita a strange look, suspecting something was wrong.<p>

"Are you sure you are alright Okita-san?"

>Okita shrugged, trying his best to look non-chalant.
"I'm fine, like I said, just tired" he couldn't help but notice how strained his voice sounded.

"I heard something about a new girl" Nagakura grinned, an mischievous glint in his eye. "Where is she?"

>"Stop drivelling like that Nagakura, you might stain the floor." Sanosuke laughed.<p>

"We're all very loud this morning." Commaned Kondo commented as he and Hijikata entered the room.

>"Indeed." Sannan commented. "There's some excitement around our guest."
"Guest?" Kondo looked confused for a few moments until it dawned on him. "Oh yes, Chizuru-chan's cousin." Kondo laughed. "Now boys, we all know the rules, no fooling around unless it's at the Inn and no relationships, especially with guests on the property." Kondo was blatantly staring at Nagakura, his eyes turning from friendly to a very serious glare. "Is that understood?"

Nagakura's face visibly sagged as he nodded in understanding, a loud sigh escaping his lips. "I never get to have any fun."

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"Morning everyone." Chizuru's soft voice somehow penetrated the madness around the breakfast table.

>Okita's heart jolted at the sound of her voice, this was the moment.

He turned his gaze slowly, Chizuru stood in the doorway, a tall girl standing behind her.<p>

"This is my cousin, Asuka Yukimura, she will staying here for a while." Chizuru bowed in front of the commander and vice-commander.

The girl stepped into the room. _She's pretty._ Okita thought to himself.

>Her long hair was wound in a bun at the nape of her neck, her eyes a deep brown colour, warm and inviting, her lips round and full. Okita noticed Nagakura fidgeting next to him, clearly also thinking this girl was beautiful. She smiled a beautiful, innocent smile, her lips parting to speak.<p>

"I would like to thank you all, of the Shinsengumi, for welcoming me and honouring me with the cordiality of offering me shelter until my home is suitable for living again." she bowed deeply, her words were rehearsed and too formal, her eyes stared at the floor throughout her thank you.

Okita's heart sank a little.

>It wasn't her, the voice didn't match, the cheeky challenge, the sultry purr, the richness was missing. He was sure his shadowy dream would not stare at the floorboards while talking. This girl was only that, a girl. As she moved past him, Okita noticed the absence of an enticing sway in her hips.
He sighed, she wasn't who he was looking for. His head drooped visibly as he started eating his breakfast, not even tasting the delicious tuna Saito had prepared. His thoughts once again returned to places he could continue his search, his friends forgotten and drowned in their own chatter, the only one that noticed Okita's change in mood was the always observant Sannan. He frowned slightly, wondering what was bothering his friend.

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"Sumi-chan?" the old woman asked for the third time, lightly tugging at her rolled-up sleeve.

>"Oba-chan?" the young woman turned, her mismatched eyes startled as she stared at the greying, wrinkled woman.
"Are you feeling alright my child, you've seemed distracted lately." worry was evident in her eyes.

Laughing it off, the woman grinned a mischievous grin. "I'm fine, just tired Oba-chan...my dreams have been...vivid lately."

>The old lady smiled knowingly, a little chuckle in her chest as she looked at the tall woman in front of her.
"I was saying you should check the safety cables before we leave Sumi-chan, I think I saw some of them fraying."

>"Yes Oba-chan, I'll do that right away!"<p>

As she turned to head to the supply wagons the old lady cleared her throat to catch the woman's attention again. "And Sumi-chan, have someone look at that cut on your arm, I don't know how you manage to hurt yourself all the time."

The woman turned back to face her senior, looking down at the angry cut on her left arm, she shrugged.

>"Just being me." Her face split into her trademark skew grin and she

sprinted off to the supply wagons, her raven black hair glistening in the sun as the strands danced in rhythm to her steps.<p>

The old woman watched her shrinking form and smiled. "You are a different breed Kasumi-chan, bless and protect the man that ever tames you."

I have to apologise, I rushed this chapter when I realised what the date was, I promised myself I would update once a week and it kinda crept up on me! Well there's always time to rewrite and fix things, I'm hoping this will be one of very few uneventful chapters.

3. Chapter 3 - Meetings and Blades

_I don't own the Hakuouki anime or any of it's characters. _

Susuma Yamazaki made no noise as he entered the room, his tread was lighter than a breeze as was required of men of his profession, he was a gatherer of info, a silent observer, a spy. He stood in a darkened corner of the room, watching the Shinsengumi enjoy their evening meal, all except Harada-san and Okita-san were there, idly chatting away. After minutes had passed he stepped from the shadows to reveal himself to his comrades.

>"Shit Susumu, you will give me a heart attack!" Nagakura shouted in surprise clutching his chest dramatically, pale as a newly washed sheet,
Heisuke burst into laughter barely being able to contain himself as he blurted out, "Maybe if you shut up for once, you'll notice what's going on around you."

>Nagakura gave Heisuke a scorching glare before muttering to himself. "As if you knew he was there..." his red cheeks showing his embarrassment.<p>

"What brings you here so late in the evening Susuma-san?" Hijikata asked, no smile on his face, knowing that Susumu rarely brought good tidings late at night.

Susumu moved closer, kneeling before this superior officers, bowing his head in respect.

>"Kondo-dono, Hijikata-dono, your presence has been requested in Hiroshima, it's a matter of great urgency." He looked up at his superiors, concern written on his face, "There will be a meeting in 7 days, with orders for both the Shinsengumi and the general militia."<p>

Silence fell over the room as all stared at the Commander and Susumu.

>"Do you know anything else Susumu-san?...What could this be about?" the commander asked clearing his throat.
"It was not made clear Kondo-dono, according to rumours and my own investigation, there seems to be plans for a large offensive in the near future."

>"Against whom?"
"As far as I am aware, it could be one of two factions Kondo-dono. There has been word of a splinter faction of the ChÅ•shÅ« , not much is known of them, or it could be the Mori Clan, both groups have grown in strength in the last few months and pose a threat to the Shogunate."

>"The Mori...that could be a difficulty, they are great in number and always well trained." Hijikata said softly, a frown knitting his brow, "Anything on the other group Susumu-san?"
"Nothing

Hijikata-dono, only rumours and speculation."

>"Could you try to find out more?"
"I will have to ask some of my agents to look into it, the Shogunate has me running errands lately." Susumu sighed heavily, "Not all of them pleasant either."

"Interesting" Kondo muttered deep in thought, everyone's attention directed at him, a grin suddenly crept over his face, slapping a large palm on his knee he quickly stood up. "Well Toshi, it sounds like we have to get packing, we leave after breakfast!" With that he turned to leave speaking as he did. "Susumu-san, help yourself to some food...make that Heisuke's food." he chuckled. "He's getting a bit plump." Kondo laughed loudly as he left hearing Heisuke's complaints ringing in the background.

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There was ten of them, whispering nervously where they gathered, all with their hands close to their weapons, twitching, fearful.
>Okita and Harada were hidden in the shadows of a nearby building, staring at their prey, waiting.
The plan was simple, Okita would take the three men closest to them and Harada, with his spear's longer reach, would take care of the two men furthest from the building, they would in effect pincher the last five men between them, cutting off any means of escape.

Okita's breath came in short, excited gasps as he waited for their signal, he enjoyed the fight, reveled in making his blade dance to his will, the fear in his opponent's eyes, the adrenaline in his veins.

A low whistle disguised as an owl hoot came from close by, it was their sign and made Harada silently move down the length of the wall, positioning himself for attack.

>In a flash Okita was moving, taking down the closest two victims before they could even realise what was happening, he could feel his blade slice through flesh and bone on the first, severing the man's head with a sharp hissing sound, blood spraying through the air, painting the low evening light red.
The second was no luckier, with Okita's blade skewering through his abdomen before being forcibly jerked to the side, as Okita withdrew his blade the man fell to the ground, spilling his life on the road.

>The third had some time to gather his wits, but wits are not enough when facing one of the best swordsmen in Japan. Okita deftly sidestepped the man's clumsy thrust and knocked the katana from his hand with one precise swoop, the man gave Okita a look of wide-eyed panic before he was slashed across the chest to his shoulder, just to feel the blade reverse and dig into his neck, a thick spray of blood painted Okita's blue overcoat as he finished the cut.<p>

Harada had been just as effective, taking down three men on the other side of the street, now Okita and Harada were staring the remainder of the men in the eye.

>"Where's your leader?" Harada growled, wiping blood off his cheek.<p>

One man, seemingly the only one not frozen in fear, shakily raised his hand and pointed at a body laying behind him.

>"Shit, we should have kept that one alive" Harada spat.
Okita pointed the tip of his blade at the survivors. "I guess we can take

some of these in for questioning."

>The trapped men's silence was broken by a single voice. "NEVER!" the frantic shout came, followed by a blood curdling scream for attack. Emboldened by their comrade, the rest of the men once again took up arms, rushing the Shinsengumi in a maddened frenzy.<p>

In the blink of an eye it was over.

>Pierce. Slash. Stab. Death.
Harada and Okita danced in unison as they culled their attackers, their speed godly, their feet never touching the ground, men falling one by one as the cobblestones beneath their feet were washed in red.

Harada stepped back giving his spear a last swing through the air to rid it of blood, as he did so he noticed the body at his feet had two shurikens sticking from its back.

>"Odd," Harada said. "This man wasn't killed by either of us, look." he pointed at the dead man.
Okita stared down at the man, immediately noticing the two stars that brought his death, his head snapped up, scanning the dark street and rooftops, searching for the woman he knew was close by.

>It was all black, no sight, no sound. Where is she?
_"Seems we're not alone," Harada commented, shrugging. "As long as those shurikens are in the enemy's back I don't mind the help, although we should tell Kondo-dono and Hijikata-san." He made to leave but was stopped in his tracks when he noticed Okita staring pensively into the dark.

"Okita?... Okita-san! Are you coming?" Okita turned to him, an unreadable expression on his face.

>"Yes." was all he muttered before joining his comrade.
What's going on with you Okita?

Harada, in an attempt to lighten his friends' mood, broke the silence.

>"Do you smell that Okita-san, it smells like orange blossom, it's been in my nose for the last hour at least."
"Orange Blossom?" Okita repeated his friend's words without contemplating them. "No, I don't..."

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As Okita and Harada came through the gate, Chizuru came running towards them, a frantic Asuka in tow. Seeing both men covered in blood they immediately assumed the worst.

>"Okita-dono." Asuka whelped as she approached. "What happened, are you injured?"
Her eyes filled with worry, she grabbed Okita's arm when she reached his side, clutching on to him like she was afraid he would vanish.

>"I'm fine Asuka-chan." he said simply, smiling down at her.
His smile affected her, Asuka's cheeks instantly turned a rosy pink as she stared into his eyes, realising she was holding on to his arm, her blush deepened even more before she let her hand fall to her side.

>"There is so much blood Okita-dono, are you sure you are not hurt?"
"Yes." Okita said gently, "This is another man's blood Asuka-chan."

>Her eyes widened in horror, she had not considered it before, everyone had been nothing but friendly to her so far. But now, faced with clear evidence, she understood, she lived with men who killed for a living.
"Does it bother you Asuka -chan?" Okita asked, his

green eyes shining brilliantly in the light of the low lamps.

>Asuka could not help but muster up smile, her heart skipping a beat when she looked at his handsome face. "Truthfully Okita-dono, my answer is yes, it does bother me." silence fell for a few seconds, "But a man as admirable as you would certainly not kill for pleasure, I am sure."
Recalling his excitement before the attack, Okita felt uncomfortable, shrugging her off he walked towards his room "You give me too much credit Asuka-chan." he said softly as he disappeared into the dark.

"What...what did I do?" Asuka asked confused, turning to Chizuru for an answer.

>Chizuru shook her head in her own confusion "I don't know, maybe he's not feeling well?"<p>

4. Chapter 4 - Notes and Arrows

I don't own the Hakuouki anime or any of it's characters.

Her fingers lightly brushed his brow, moving stray strands of hair from his face. He felt her softly tracing the contour of his cheek, lovingly stroking it as her delicate fingers sent ripples down his spine, he concentrated on her warm touch as she purred his name in a whisper, her voice soothing away all the tension in his aching limbs, her mere presence bringing him peace he had not known for years.

>He reached up to pull her closer to his body, but she evaded him, intangible like mist, a soft chuckle escaping her invisible lips as he grasped at nothing.
"Elusive as ever." he murmured sleepily.

>He heard the smile in her voice as she whispered close to his ear, her breath tickling in his neck, "As it should be."
A smirk crossed his face, quickly to be replaced by a nervous smile as he felt the heat of her body draw near, her hand cupping his cheek, she was closer than ever and his mind raced with want, he wanted to crush his lips to hers, he wanted to taste her, he wanted her body in his embrace.

>The faint tickle of her hair on his face made him shiver in anticipation, her soft lips lightly brushing against his own, once again he reached up, needing to span the small gap still separating their lips.<p>

"Okita!" Nagakura's voice boomed into his ears, breaking the fragile dream into a million pieces, "Kondo-dono is leaving soon, get up." A loud hammering on the door frame followed by Nagakura's heavy stomping down the passageway brought Okita fully out of his slumber.

>"Shit, damn you Nagakura...why now?" Okita hissed to himself through clenched teeth.<p>

With a heavy heart he lifted himself from the futon, sitting up straight, waiting for the coughs to wrack his body. Nothing came.

>"At least something good." Okita muttered dragging his palm across his face, as he readied himself to get up he noticed something from the corner of his eye, slowly he turned in its direction.
"What is that? And where..." his eyes quickly scanned the room, looking for an intrusion, something out of place, only to find it as it always was,

bare.

>He carefully reached for the object, a green glass vial with a cork stopper, it was cold to the touch and Okita winced at the iciness of it, as he lifted it from the floor a small piece of paper that was tied to the neck fell to the bamboo covered ground. Intrigued, he picked it up, turning it in his hand.
It was tightly bound with twine and seemed to be a note of some sort, Okita undid the knot, eager to read what was written inside. The writing was eloquent, beautiful, clearly written by someone well educated, the paper was just a scrap but it was clear that the ink was expensive, the quality was in the deep colour.

Shinsengumi-dono.

_Since our meeting I have found myself deeply troubled by your illness.

>I have seen this illness before and I know the pain that comes with it, I do not wish to see you suffer. Please accept the vial I left at your bedside, it's not a cure but will surely help with your symptoms, I discovered it on one of my many journeys and the Isha that gave it to me is a good, honest man. He had sworn on his family that it would work.

The note wasn't signed and stopped abruptly, like it was written in haste.

>Okita stared at the piece of paper in disbelief, he brought it closer to his face to make sure it was real, a faint scent of orange blossom clung to it and filled his nose, closing his eyes he slowly breathed in the aroma, enjoying it's citrusy smell.
A stark realisation came to him. She had been there, in his room, so close to him. He unknowingly moved his hand to his cheek, still feeling her warm touch, her delicate fingers tracing his jaw, her breath on his neck.

>I know you are real now, he smiled_, I was starting to doubt my sanity, but...was this real...or a dream? _His hand stayed where he had felt hers for a few seconds before he dropped his it to his lap, his heart willing his dreamt memories to life, making them real in his mind. He felt his smile spread until his face split into a grin, his heart beating slightly faster.

Feeling intoxicated by his thoughts, he decided to study the vial closer. Holding it up to the light, he saw the liquid inside swivel around effortlessly as he tilted the vial, it seemed to be clear inside its green glass container. The cork came out with a "pop" as he carefully removed it, a stifling odour spilling from the vial, Okita nearly choked as he got a full breath of it in his mouth. He carefully brought it back to his nose to take a brief sniff, he didn't recognise any ingredient and was once again repulsed by the odor.

>"Poison?" Okita took a last whiff from the vial. "_No...it's can't be, she wouldn't...or..." _He was taken by doubt, his heart telling him to use the potion, lobbying for his mysterious visitor, his head shouting warnings at him. He was confused, conflicted, a deep frown replacing the smile of a moment ago.

"Okita-san?" Sannan's soft voice came from outside the door. "Are you coming, Kondo-dono and Hijikata-san are about to leave."

>With a start Okita remembered why he had been so rudely awoken in the first place. Scurrying from his futon he scrambled to get dressed, placing the vial back on the floor as he rose.
"Apologies

Sannan-san, I'm having a slow morning." he grinned as he pushed past Sannan to leave for the courtyard.

>"Sannan-san." Sannan looked up at Okita who was already halfway to his destination.
"Will you please close my door." he shouted.

>"Sure." Sannan replied loudly, turning back to do as he was asked, taking the door edge in his hand, he threw a quick glance across Okita's room, immediately noticing the green vial next to his futon.
An eyebrow raised, Sannan stared at it for a few seconds before sliding the door closed, turning to join his comrades. "What are you up to Okita?"

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It was a clear morning, spring was close and the last winter snow was slowly melting on the muddy, slippery ground, a cool breeze blew through the courtyard where the Shinsengumi were gathered, their blue overcoats fluttering in a synchronised dance.

Asuka stood with the men, waiting, she did not understand the importance or urgency of what was happening, she did not understand politics or men who killed for the Shogunate, but she had grown to like the Shinsengumi and as such, she wished Kondo and Hijikata-dono all the best in their travels.

She scanned the group, looking for one person in particular, as her gaze turned back to the household she saw her main subject of interest approaching hastily.

>"Okita-dono" she whispered, her heart skipping a beat as the sun caught the red highlights in his brown hair, the morning rays showing off his handsome features. He passed her and gave her a short greeting, her heart nearly melted as his light green eyes and soft smile met hers, he was the most handsome man she had ever seen, her smile spreading wide and girlish.
He stopped a few feet in front of her, taking his place next to Harada-san, his shoulders were broad and strong, his tall frame lean but well built, the looseness of his uwagi not hiding his muscular chest and arms. Asuka let out a wistful sigh as she stared at his back, the conversation at the front of the small gathering only a hum in her ears.

"Judging by the weather the journey might take longer." Kondo-dono said while staring at the muddy ground.

>"Which means we should leave immediately Kondo-dono." Hijikata said, his nervous hand gestures and near clenched teeth a clear sign that he was worried, apprehensive for this meeting. His nervousness did not go unnoticed by the gathered Shinsengumi and more than one of them raised an eyebrow in curiousness.
"Why is Toshi so tense?" Harada mumbled in Okita's ear.

>"I don't know, I've rarely seen him like this, and it's never been a good sign when I did."
"Should we be worried?"

>Okita carefully studied Hijikata, seeing the tired lines on his face and slight twist in his neck muscles, his shoulders unnaturally straight and stiff, he then turned his gaze to the Commander, who was still holding the reins of his horse loosely, his face relaxed, carrying a broad smile as he said his goodbyes to Chizuru and Asuka.
"Not yet Harada-san." Okita said plainly.

/

She heard the arrow whirr through the air before she saw it's glint,

it cut a clear path for itself, slicing through the cold of the late afternoon, it was off target and she didn't even try to dodge the deadly projectile as it hit the tree behind her with a distinctive, deadly thud. She wasn't the target, she realised when she noticed a small rolled up note attached to the shaft, sealed with a crest she would recognise in an instant.

>Kasumi ripped the arrow from the tree trunk, skimming the area to make sure no-one was there to notice her delivery, satisfied that she was alone, she broke the seal.
"What do we have here?" she muttered to herself as she carefully unrolled the paper, quickly reading it's contents she grinned, a feral, dangerous grin, it only had one phrase scrawled on it's surface.

>The nightingale sings.
_The note ended with a symbol only she recognised as signifying ten days.

Kasumi crumpled the note in her hand and set to breaking the arrow shaft into pieces. Leisurely walking back to the camp, and excited pit in her stomach, she threw both note and shaft in the closest fire pit she could find, watching the momentary flare as they caught fire.

>"Oba-chan." she addressed the old, greying lady approaching her.
"Yes Sumi-chan?"

>"How long until we reach Kyoto, the weather has been so bad lately."
"Four...maybe five days sweetheart, the wagons are struggling with the wet road, if we were travelling on foot we would have been there already." the old lady said in a somber tone.

>"I know." Kasumi said with a mischievous grin.
"Are you excited to see the city?" the old lady asked innocently.

>"More than you can imagine Oba-chan...more than you can imagine." a loud chuckle escape her lips, her heart feeling warm and excitement simmering in her veins.<p>

5. Chapter 5 - Fire and Worries

I don't own Hauouki or any of it's characters.

"Understood." The confirmation came firmly from her mouth as she stared into the dark grove before her, the slight echo of her own voice sending a cold shiver down her spine.

>Knelt down in submissive respect, Kasumi felt annoyance rise in her chest, she hated bowing to anyone, even her superiors. Always so bossy, always looking down. She smirked inwardly. _If only they knew.__

>Her annoyance didn't just come from the unexpected late night meeting with her elusive leader but also the from the fact that her night's plans were now all but ruined, she would never make it to Kyoto tonight, something that she really looked forward to, her secret routine that always ended with her watching at him, his eyes never fell on her, but hers were always trained on him.

Staying in that position for a few minutes longer, she pondered the information she had just received and the new orders resulting from it. A small smile formed on her full lips, the full realisation only coming after her annoyance had subsided. "It would have happened eventually." she softly murmured to herself.

>She rose, slowly, grunting as stiff pain shot through her leg, she unconsciously rubbed the new cut, wincing when she nicked the edge slightly.
"Shinsengumi-dono, you will be the death of me yet." She chuckled, shaking her head.

Sauntering back to camp, she did not notice the newcomer until he was only a few feet from her, his loud, warning cough alerting her.

>"Shinji-san." She stuttered as the man came from the dark to stand in front of her. "What are you doing here?"
"I could ask the same, Sumi-chan." the man replied with a gruff, suspicious tone, one dark eyebrow raised in question, his disheveled hair hanging in his face hiding his true expression. "It's dangerous out here at night so far away from the camp."

>"I just needed some time alone." Kasumi shrugged, pushing past him to continue on her way, as she passed him he grabbed her wrist, stopping her dead in her tracks.
"I'll walk you back." His eyes met hers, saying much more than his lips uttered, she glared at him furiously, seeing the intention in his gaze.

>"Shinji, stop it, you know it's not an option." Kasumi jerked her wrist from his grip, her eyes thinning to a scorching squint.
"Fine." he growled, "But the day will come that you will be begging."

A long, tense moment passed between them, each trying to stare the other down, a near electric static filling the air around them. Kasumi felt the hairs in the back of her neck rise with the anger and annoyance, like a cornered cat, she could feel her hands clench, nails ready to strike out.

>"We'll see." She spat the challenge at him. "...I don't have time for this Shinji."

She started towards the camp again, shoulders stiff as she walked faster her strides longer than necessary, Shinji followed, close on her heels, silent but still very present.

/

Two days had passed since the Commander and Hijikata-san had left, and word had since been sent that it was not just the Shinsengumi leaders that were called upon, but various other people in power across the district.

>The base was bristling with anticipation, tense conversations and speculations ruled the dinner table as everyone waited for their leaders to return.

Okita walked into his room, drenched in sweat from his practice bout, Nagakura had brutally taken him through his paces, throwing everything he could at Okita.

>"I'm getting weaker." he sighed as he fell down on his futon, his body bruised and aching, without thought his eyes moved to the unused green vial next to his pillow.
"Should I try?"

>He thought of Asuka's face when she saw him limping towards his room, blood on his cheek and torn arm, her eyes were wide in near panic, rushing towards him to help. He had brushed her off, angrily ordering her to leave him alone, he felt ashamed, beaten and he merely watched as she cringed at his voice before quietly taking her leave. "I should apologise."

He sighed, reaching out to touch the cold glass of the mysterious vial, it felt smooth under his fingers and he stared at the liquid within. That morning he had woken with a bout of coughs worse than ever, blood had covered his hands and his sheets were stained, his limbs ached and he couldn't move for minutes.

And then...Nagakura had beat him...hands down.

Okita shuddered at the thought, he was one of the best swordsmen in Japan and Shinpachi Nagakura had beaten him without even breaking a sweat, and here he was, exhausted, drenched and waiting for a storm of coughs to wrack his body. He let out another long sigh, which made the bloody coughs spill from his chest into his mouth.

His hand clenched around the neck of the green vial, as he doubled over in pain, clenching his abdomen, he thought of the note that accompanied the vial and slipped his hand under his pillow to find the scrap of paper, his lifeline. When he felt it's brittle edges a wave of reassurance washed over him, the coughs died down to an uncomfortable scratch in his throat and after a few moments a slight smile touched the corner of his mouth. _I don't have much to loose, I'll put my faith in you._

With a single swift movement he popped off the cork and brought the vial to his lips, trying not to breathe as he gulped down the repulsive liquid. Like a river of flaming lava it went down his throat, setting his chest on fire as it reached his damaged lungs, he sputtered, coughed, stars flashing before his eyes from the painful fire. His head was swimming, fighting for consciousness, he fell back feeling the imaginary spin of his futon, no the whole world spun, it spun until all the colours around him swirled to a stark black, a black that swallowed him whole. _Peace?_

Minutes, maybe hours later he opened his eyes, the burning had ebbed to a comfortable warmth in his chest, cautiously he took an experimental deep breath, waiting for more coughs to erupt, nothing came and he soon realised that it was easier to breathe, the stitch he had felt with every breath for the last few months was gone. Slowly sitting up, Okita exhaled, feeling air freely rush from his lungs, no pain, just normal air leaving his body. He instinctively patted himself down, checking if everything was still were he remembered, a wave of relief crashed down on him and he burst into a fit of laughter, the first time in months that he felt like himself again.

"Okita-san?" he only heard Sannan-san's voice after the third greeting, with a huge grin he looked up at his friend standing in the open door's frame.

>"Yes Sannan-san?"
"Are you alright? I saw Asuka crying earlier and...well...Chizuru said something about you being furious and shouting." Sannan stared down at his friend questioningly, the empty green vial laying on the floor not escaping his notice.

"I am..." Okita stared down at his hands in wonder, turning them over like it's the first time he noticed them. "I am great Sannan-san." his voice heavy with elation.

>"I'll apologise to Asuka-chan, she caught me at a bad moment."
"Ah, I heard Nagakura-san had given you quite the beating...unusual to say the least...are you sure everything is fine?"

>"Yes, yes, perfect." said Okita as he lifted himself from the floor, new life in his limbs and his heart.
"As long as you say so Okita-san." Sannan's voice was laced with suspicion as he turned to leave, the image of a green vial imprinted in his mind._I'll find out what's going on Okita, you've never been good at hiding

things._

Okita looked on as Sannan-san left, a joyful smile still painted on his face.

>I am in your debt again, Mistress of Mist. He chuckled.
Mistress of Mist, I think that's suits you perfectly. After a few seconds Okita laughed again, his silly notion growing on him as he left his room to find Asuka-chan.

/

Susumu was growing tired of his commander's incessant humming, from old folk songs to tunes he'd only heard in less than respectable establishments, the commander never stopped and Susumu felt himself on the verge of exploding.

"Kondo-dono, will the Shinsengumi be ready if this turned out to be an order for war?" Susumu couldn't think of any other way to get him to stop.

>"AH, we're always ready Susumu-san, you should know that." the commander grinned a toothy grin at the young spy. " Besides, I think the boys will enjoy getting more than just practice, they've cleaned most of the Kyoto streets, not much a challenge left there."
"But that could be a problem Kondo-dono." Hijikata's serious voice came from behind. "No matter what our orders are, we should start with a more rigorous exercise program when we return, I don't want the men to grow soft because there is no challenge." Hijikata's brow knitted in worry.

"You worry too much Toshi, we have the best men in Kyoto...maybe even the country, they won't let themselves grow soft."

>Hijikata shot a doubtful look at his commander, one that Susumu did not miss.
The commander turned slightly in his saddle so he could see both the men accompanying him.

>"Now if you two are done with your eyeballing, I am sure I can get back to annoying Susumu-san with my humming." with that the commander started a particularly high-pitched tune, one he had learnt from a very curvy lady at a very disreputable inn, he smiled, trying to keep his darkening thoughts at bay.<p>

He was worried. Susumu-san had brought word that other organisations were also called for, Susumu's intelligence corps included, this worried Kondo more than he let on, this meeting was out of the ordinary, even for the shogunate.

Stealing a glance backwards, he once again heard Hijikata-san's voice in his head..._the men grow soft...Y_our opinion might well be valid Toshi, I don't know if we are ready for war. The skill might be there, but our hearts?_Kondo's thoughts went to his men, the men who had brought order to Kyoto, the men who fought with pride, Harada, Nagakura, Okita, Heisuke, Todo, Saito. _No, we can handle anything that comes our way._Kondo convinced himself, trying to ignore the faint tickle of nervousness in the back of his mind and heart.

6. Chapter 6 - Orders and Night

I don't own Hauouki or any of it's characters.

* * *

><p>Chapter 5

"Up ahead Kondo-dono." Susumu called as he came riding towards them, his short brown hair whipping in his eyes. "There's a full company of guards waiting for us."

>"So much for stopping at the Inn first." Kondo huffed, he needed a stiff drink to calm his nerves. "Well, let's go then." He spurred his horse to a brisk trot, climbing the last rise before the town of Hiroshima was laid bare before them.<p>

The late evening sun painted the town with long, creeping shadows, swallowing the many small dwellings littered in the basin. Hiroshima was quiet compared to the bustle of Kyoto, only a few vendors called for their last customers of the day, the shuffle of feet clearly audible in the dusty streets, not like Kyoto, where the sound of footfalls were drowned by voices, banter and laughter.

As they rode down the incline towards the town center, Kondo realised that the peace and calm was a farce, uneasy glances shot from passersby, the townspeople very much on edge, there seemed to be armed soldiers on every street corner, the air tense and electrified.

>Kondo glanced back seeing his thoughts reflected on Hijikata's face, he gave him a slight nod before slowing his horse's pace to fall in step with Hijikata.<p>

Approaching the official shogunate estate in the center of the town, the military presence grew visibly, soldiers idly chatting away or preparing for their change in shifts.

>"A lot of them around." Hijikata commented off-handedly, trying to look non-fussed about it.
"Especially for a supposed _secret _meeting." Kondo muttered, a thought came to him and he leaned closer to Hijikata "Do you think the Shogun is here Toshi-san?" he whispered.

>"I don't know, security would suggest thatâ€|butâ€|we would have knownâ€|wouldn't we?"
Kondo shrugged. "We should know, but there are days that I'm not sure how trusted we are, we'll have to wait and see what this meeting is about."

The large gates creaked open as they came down the paved path and they were met with the opposite of what they expected. Their horse's clip-clopping seemed deafening in the dusk filled gardens, only a few guards dotted the edge of the garden unlike outside the estate.

>"Why all the show?" Hijikata muttered next to Kondo.
"Could be to attract attention, a misguided enemy is a weak enemy." Susumu commented as they dismounted their horses, servants rushing to take their bridles.

As they entered the Shoin styled mansion, a guardsman greeted them with a salute before showing them to an empty waiting room, leaving with a promise of refreshments while they wait. Moments later a petite serving girl entered with a tray of steaming tea. Kondo sighed. "The least they could do is give us some saki."

/

She sat on the windowsill, staring at the man sleeping soundly on the futon. She didn't need a lot of light, a creature of the night, her

eyes were accustomed to the dark and the strands of moonlight coming from outside were enough for her to admire the sight.

His red brown hair was loose and strewn over the small pillow, his thick lashes hiding his eyes from her, his lips were set in an easy smile as he dreamt of something pleasant. Softly her feet touched the bamboo floor as she climbed down from her seat, she made no sound sneaking closer, reaching his side she knelt down, placing a gentle hand on his chest.

His breath came steady and she was delighted to hear the smooth exhale of air from his chest, smiling she looked at his serene face and let out a small sigh.

>"If only things were different, if only I was different." a momentary flash of a frown crossed her face before she made peace with her own fate and peered down at the man that had somehow captured herâ€| is it my heart or imagination that you caught? Maybe both.

Rummaging through her satchel she took out a small green vial, filled with a mixture that had taken much to acquire, she spun the vial in her hand, mesmerized by the play of green shades in the moonlight.

>"Hopefully I can bring more." she whispered to herself placing it on the floor, next to the futon. Her gaze returned to him, her heart skipping a beat just by the sight, leaning forward until her nose nearly touched his, she smiled. You are a handsome man Okita Souji.

He sighed softly, as if he heard her, and turned in his sleep, unconsciously slinging his arm around her shoulder, pulling her down towards him. Her heart stopped for a few seconds, her breath taken by his scent, her agility by the warmth of his embrace, he muttered something under his breath and tried to pull her even closer.

_NO. _

She scrambled from his arms, knocking over the green vial and nearly stumbling over a loose pillow on the floor. Flustered she quickly scanned the room to make sure she wasn't detected before darting towards the window. Perching on the windowsill once more, she gave Okita a last longing stare before escaping into the safety of the night, cursing herself for her infatuation, her weakness.

>An unfinished, too revealing note accidentally dropped from her pocket rolled over the edge of the windowsill onto the floor below.<p>

/

The distinct noise of glass on wood woke him. Half asleep, Okita's hand instinctively reached for his katana and unsheathed it. Sitting upright, his sight obscured by darkness, he used his ears to scan the night, nothingâ€| he sighed. _And my dreams were so pleasant.

>He could still feel her warm body in his arms, so vividly so, that it seemed more real than ever. He sighed again before he realised the window on the far side of the room was wide open, a soft chill sweeping over his face.

>"Odd." He muttered as he raised himself from his futon, intent on closing the gaping hole, a rush of Orange Blossom bombarded his nose

and he froze. She was hereâ€¦maybeâ€¦

He spun around searching for a source of light, his fingers fumbling with the flint as he tried to light the lamp next to the futon.

Please be here, pleaseâ€¦|

Light bloomed from the lamp and his eyes painfully adjusted, the bright light subsided to reveal his room empty. S_he's not here_. Okita's heart sank, falling back on his futon his mind wandered to the mystery. _Who is she? And whyâ€¦|

>He stretched out his arms, his hand brushing cold glass, with a start he looked up and saw a familiar green vial lying on the floor. Gripping the glass he brought the container to his face, watching as the foul smelling liquid twirled and circled itself.

"Why are you helping me?" he whispered, he was confused and felt annoyance rise through him. "Why will you not show your face?"

>His mind wondered to their first, and to him, their only meeting.
She wore armour, she was skilled, more so than most and killing a man did not bother her, she was not a stranger to violence..._could you be the enemy? But then...why help me? _Okita had a momentary doubt in his mind about the vial in his hand. _No. _He shook his head, something inside told him she did not want to kill him. Still he was perplexed.

A note, the last vial came with a note. He placed the vial on the floor once more and searched the room, seeing what he was looking for on the ground next to the open window. He scrambled to get up, reaching the tied roll of paper in seconds, ripping off the twine he immediately recognised the elegant angles of her writing. His heart thumped as he read.

_Shinsengumi-dono

>I am pleased to see you have taken the elixir, I feared that you would not, given its unknown origin. Thankfully it seems to be working. I would ask that you use this vial sparingly, I do not know when I will be able to return with more, _I have been sent on a mission of great importance which_

Also, I would recommend caution around Yamanami Keisuke-dono, I believe he is suspicious of your actions of late.

The note ended abruptly and was written in haste, Okita strained his eyes to read the scratched out parts. _A mission?_ _How did she know so much? Sannan-san? What did he know? _His mind raced through all the questions but they vanished as his chest warmed re-reading the note, realising that her words were soft and admitted her worry for him, written in a caring tone, _was there more to those words? _He didn't like that she would not return soon and from what he could gather from the scratched out writing, it seemed like something serious. _Next time I'll be awake and waiting_, he promised himself as he dampened the flame of his lamp, his mind occupied by the mystery that was her.

/

It was silent in the large room as Kondo-dono gave thought to what he had just heard.

The Mori Clan was formidable and to hear that they have enlisted

numerous Shogunate defectors was disheartening, there were rumours that they had joined with even darker forces, something that Susumu's operatives were investigating at that very moment. A full offensive against them in the heart of enemy territory was a frightening thought, even to the leader of the Shinsengumi.

Kondo looked up at the line of stern faces in front of him. _I really need a drink, _he thought as he cleared his throat to speak.

>"Are we sure this is wise? Do we have any idea of their strength?"
A heavy-set bald man answered, "That is why we requested Yamazaki-san be present, he will be given orders after this meeting."

>Hijikata looked over at Susumu questioningly, Susumu shrugged in answer, not knowing any more than the rest of the Shinsengumi.<p>

"Fine, we will meet at the rally point in a month's time." Kondo was loathe to agree to this reckless plan, but saw no choice in the matter.

>"Then you and your second are dismissed, Yamazaki-san stay for your orders." the bald man said, not even looking at Kondo as they left.<p>

As they entered the empty waiting room, Hijikata turned to Kondo.

>"This is insane!" was all he blurted before picking up his belongings.
"I know, they're sending us in blind, almost all of their troops, they must be terrified of something."

>"Dark forces, what on earth does that mean?" Hijikata was clearly upset, his face flushed in anger.
"I have no idea Toshi, and it scares the hell out of me..." Kondo shuddered as he thought of what those words could entail. "Come, we can't waste time here, we need to prepare..."

>"Prepare for what..." Hijikata's ominous words hung heavily in the air as they rushed to find their horses.<p>

7. Chapter 7 - Horrors and Indecision

I don't own Hauouki or any of it's characters.

* * *

><p>Kasumi came from the early morning mist like she was one with it, swirling around her, her namesake did well to disguise her late return. Soft dew drops fell from the strands of hair in her face, dripping to her shoulders and chest, she loved this time of day.<p>

She stepped silently into the camp, knowing that everyone would still be asleep, she walked with a relaxed confidence, her heart still warm from Okita's embrace, her lush lips curved into a beautiful, mischievous smile.

"And where have you been Sumi-chan?" Shinji's smirk was enough to annoy Kasumi. He leapt from the rocky outcrop he had been sitting on and walked straight at her, grabbing her wrist when he was close enough, "You are playing a dangerous game...woman." he sneered, bringing his face right up against hers. "I'm watching you..." was all he said before he turned and left, making sure to twist her wrist

painfully as he did.

Kasumi stared at his back as he left, a string of curses playing in her head. "_And to think I loved you once..." her mind flooded with more intimate memories of Shinji, a light shudder running down her spine. "You will not have me again."

Lost in her own angry thoughts, Kasumi did not hear the old lady approach.

>You are up early Sumi-chan."
She turned, quickly painting her face with a smile.

>"Of course Oba-chan! We'll be in Kyoto today, how could I sleep with all the excitement."
"Indeed Sumi-chan." the old woman smiled at the young woman's exuberance, reminded of her own reaction when she came to the city for the first time. "And if our performances go well, we might have the honour of meeting the Shogun himself. Now that would be something." she smiled.

>"Yes...that would be...something..." Kasumi dropped her head, her voice quiet.<p>

The old lady was taken aback by Sumi-chan's reaction, but quickly brushed it off as nerves.

>"You'll do fine Sumi-chan." she reassuringly patted Kasumi on the shoulder. "You and Shinji-san make a great team." She didn't understand the tension that suddenly shot through the young woman's body and knew it was time to distract her.<p>

"Let's go and check the supplies Sumi-chan, we will be leaving shortly...for the big city." she said with a toothy grin as she walked towards the wagons, hearing soft footfalls following her.

/

Three days had passed since Okita had woken to an open window and a new vial of medicine. He now took a small sip of the vile concoction, trying to swallow as fast as possible, it still burnt like molten flame, but he had grown used to it and the fact that the liquid was his current salvation, made him bear it without a grimace.

He felt uneasy, he could not shake the foreboding feeling that his 'Mistress of Mist' was in trouble, he was convinced.

He had reread her last note numerous times, the ill attempt at hiding her words haunting him, Mission, what did it mean? He couldn't banish his thoughts of her faltering, falling, the only colour in his visions was red, her blood.

>Okita sighed, he needed to meet her, quell his own worries, he felt naked, unarmed and unable to react. He can't help her if he doesn't know her.<p>

Her note had confirmed one suspicion, she had a dangerous occupation, whatever it might be.

_A note...

>It was the only way he could reach her, their only contact.

Okita searched his room for the ink and brush he needed, and unceremoniously fell down on the floor, crossing his legs as he did.

He stared at the blank sheet of hanshi before him and froze._ How do I start? What do I call you? _His mind searched for a way to talk to her, let her know his yearning for her without writing it down, his appreciation, his infatuation, his hand shook as he attempted the first stroke.

_I can't get you out of my mind.

>Okita looked at the sentence and chuckled. "Now that is quite the opening line." He took the sheet in his hand and crumpled the paper into the smallest ball he could, throwing it into the corner of his room. Taking a deep breath he tried again, still not sure what he was about to write.

_I am not a man of deep words, I have always found my katana speaks much louder and clearer than my tongue, you have given me another chance to use my sword, and for that I will never be able to thank you enough. _Okita leaned back and studied his own handy work. "That's better." he smiled before taking brush to paper again.

_I am not a man of deep words, I have always found my katana can talk much louder and clearer than my tongue, you have given me another chance to use my sword, and for that I will never be able to thank you enough.

>I am hoping that I can meet my saviour and thank her in person, I will be waiting in Maruyama Park two nights from today as the moon reaches it's highest point, under the weeping Cherry Tree. It is my wish to see you. - _Okita Souji_

For what was not the first time in the last hour, Okita wished he had paid more attention to Sannan-san's writing lessons. "It will have to do..." he shook his head in dismay at his own lack of elegant expression. Carefully tying the thread from her last note around his own, he placed it in the only spot he knew she would find it, on the windowsill.

Taking his katana from its resting place, Okita made for the door, ready for the night's patrol. A last glance at the tied up note made Okita chuckle. "You are a silly man Souji..."

>"And why is that Okita-san?" Sannan asked leaning casually against the door frame, one eyebrow arched in question.<p>

A surprised Okita stammered. "I...I'm just...um...you know Sannan-san, it's not safe sneaking up on people like that...You could get a blade in the stomach."

>Sannan's laughter could be heard to the other side of the courtyard as he slapped Okita on the back. "Somehow I think killing me was the last thing on your mind my friend." his face turned a shade more serious. "Okita-san, you'll have to tell me sooner or later."<p>

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The lazy drop of sweat rolling over Susumu's brow was an annoyance, he waited patiently for it to pass his closed eye before he moved further down the dark corridor. He swore silently as he heard the thump of booted feet approaching, he had nowhere to hide and could only hope that the patrol was too occupied by his earlier diversion to notice a man perched just above their heads.

>Holding his breath he watched as the men passed by, their urgent conversation telling him that they were indeed heading towards the

main entrance.<p>

Susumu exhaled sharply as the patrol rounded the corner, the Mori Clan's mansion echoing eerily in their wake. He was alone again, with little time to waste until sunrise, he leapt from the wooden support and hit the floor at a silent run, his feet taking him to an unsure destination.

He had a mission, information to gather, a life to extinguish. His own life could soon be nothing and as always, his thoughts went to his friends, his family, his duty. He would not fail, for failure meant not being alive and that, was not acceptable.

>He stopped when he saw the flicker of light up ahead, a whisper of voices accompanying the glow. He slipped from one shadow to another as he approached, the low light his advantage, as he neared the door he could hear them clearly.<p>

"The deal has been made Master." a gruff voice said, fear evident.

>"Then you are dismissed." the sound was dark, the voice reverberating with evil intent, like venom dripping from a viper's teeth.
A scuffle as the man left, then an outdrawn yawn.

An uncomfortable silence fell around Susumu, tension thick in the air as he readied himself for the kill. This man was his target and rightly so, his way into the depths of the mansion was filled with tortured slaves and grotesque scenes of death, mangled bodies littered the grounds, not even children were spared from the sick, bloodied corridors. There was evil at work here and if he could stop it sooner than later, he would do so without hesitance.

>"You have come to kill me Shinsengumi Susumu-san." It was not a question, but a statement.<p>

Susumu froze, his heart stopped, suspended in a horrid second in time.

>"I will not allow it." the speaker drawled. "Go back to your masters if you survive. Tell them of what you have seen here, the atrocities, nothing can prepare you for what is to come." it went silent, the air deadly, the speaker vanished and time stood still.<p>

Seconds, minutes, maybe hours passed, Susumu inhaled sharply. He did not know where the man went or when, he had been trapped in fear, so much so that he had lost track of his surroundings, the sound of approaching soldiers shot him into action. Susumu ran.

They had been exposed, maybe even betrayed and he had agents on the Mori grounds. He had to get them out of there.

/

Kasumi stared as the sun crept from its covers, purples and reds swirled together, paving the way for the day to come. Bright ribbons fluttered in the breeze, playing their own game of tag with the bamboo poles on the edge of the stage. The sound of workmen huffing and cursing was a distant drone, their hammers giving the sunrise an easy rhythm.

Her thoughts were far from her surroundings.

>Her hand tightened, feeling the delicate hanshi paper crumple in her grip. She was conflicted, tortured by the new option she had been

given, she cursed under her breath as she realised she was considering meeting him in earnest. I can not be revealed, her mind shouted even as her heart fought against it.

She still felt his embrace, his warmth and her iron will melted to indecision. She craved more of him, at times it felt more like a urgent need than an infatuation. She dropped her head in dismay, there was much at stake here and she knew her heart had to come a far second. Visions of what was to come swam before her eyes, she could not ignore what she knew, as much as her heart tried to convince her otherwise.

She wished for a sign, some divine providence, showing her the right way.

"You should follow your heart dear." The old woman said as she stopped next to Kasumi, chuckling as she saw the shocked expression on her face. "I can see something is bothering you." The woman stated, "Do what you feel is right for you." She smiled up at the young woman, "That's how I've always done it."
>"It's not that simple." Kasumi sighed.
"It is my dear, YOU are the one complicating it." She gave Kasumi a knowing stare before walking off towards the stage, humming softly to herself.

Kasumi stared at the old lady for a few moments before a tiny smile graced her lips. Her decision was made.

8. Chapter 8 - Monsters and Preparations

Firstly I'd like to thank everyone for their feedback, it's great to know that there are people out there enjoying my little fanfic. Originally I planned for eight chapters, but as these things go, the story has grown and evolved on it's own to become something much larger than planned, that being said, I'm loving writing this fanfic and I can definitely accommodate a few extra chapters.

The following chapter I found pretty hard to write though, a combination of not enough time, no words and things taking forever to just feel right has made it the hardest chapter so far, so please be gentle (ish) when lambasting me with reviews :D

Enjoy!

**I don't own Hauouki or any of it's characters.**

* * *

><p>Chapter 7

Susumu looked back at his comrades, four, all that was left of his original team of eight, half of his team gone and they weren't safe from the Mori Clan yet. He felt his back strain as he wiped the blood from his eyes, a deep cut in his hairline pouring the crimson fluid over his brow. He had never felt this tired.

>"Susumu." A strong but soft hand rested on his shoulder, worry clear in the woman's voice, "Are you alright? Should I take the lead?"
"No...I'll be fine...let's go." Susumu bolted from the alcove they had taken cover in, one last stretch of lawns and they would be at the edge of the woods. Safety.

He sprinted, his tired legs aching with every foot fall, then, from nowhere they appeared. The Mori Clan's monsters " thin, sinewy men, skin darkened by rot and disease. They were fast and agile, precise and bloodthirsty, they fought like rabid beasts not caring for their own lives or those around them.

Susumu heard a gurgle to his left, then a thud as one fell, a tantÅ sticking from it's throat. Glancing sideways he saw one of his best agents sweep past, jerking the poisoned dagger from the monster as she ran forward, he detachedly noticed that these creatures did not bleed.

He turned to continue his wild dash when three attackers appeared in front of him, Susumu launched himself from his sprint directly at their feet, and all three crashed to the ground in a tangle of macabre flesh. Susumu rolled to his feet like a cat, spun and kicked one of the floundering attackers solidly behind the ear, a satisfying crack answered his boot. The others, half risen, made to attack, just in time to receive Susumu's heels in their faces as the agile agent leapt into the air, twisted and struck with both legs. Thudding to the ground, Susumu's bladed hand came down.

>Slash. Pierce. Slice.
Sluggish black liquid arced from a monster's chest, splashing across his face and arms, stinging his skin.

Rising from his crouch, shurikens whizzed past his face taking down more attackers, he saw the last of his men slip into the darkness of the looming treeline and gave a relieved sigh as he followed, leaving a gruesome trail behind.

>He had to report his failure to the Shogunate, he had to warn them.<p>

/

Asuka's legs dangled off the porch edge as she swung them lazily, a soft drizzle of cherry blossoms settling around her, covering the world with a sweet pink tablecloth. Her thoughts were preoccupied with a certain Shinsengumi-san and she didn't notice her cousin sitting down next to her.

"Asuka-chan?" Chizuru looked at her questioningly. "What is on your mind? I've known you long enough to know when something is troubling you."

>Asuka let out a long sigh before looking up at Chizuru, "Okita-san..." was all that she uttered before dropping her head again.
"Yes...he has been acting strange." Chizuru face scrunched into a worried frown. " But he's been looking a bit better the last few days." she said innocently, oblivious to her cousin's feelings.

"No" Asuka muttered, "It's more than that...I...I really like him Chizuru-chan." she said fidgeting uncomfortably.

>"What!" Chizuru nearly shouted, "You mean..."
"Yes...but he doesn't seem to notice me, do you think he has someone."

>"No! Definitely not, I would have known...maybe...maybe he's just shy." Chizuru giggled, not able to combine shyness and Okita in the same image.<p>

Chizuru looked at her cousin for a few moments, deep in thought, then

a smile spread over her lips, "I know Asuka-chan! All you need is some time with him, ALONE. You can tell him how you feel." Chizuru vaulted up in excitement. "You're beautiful, a hard worker, obedient, the perfect lady...I'm sure he'll be happy to know your feelings!"

>"Really? You believe so?"
"Of course! You're perfect for each other." Chizuru could hardly contain herself, her excitement infectious.

Asuka felt her spirits lift at Chizuru's words. Her face lit up as she thought of a future with Okita, their wedding, their house, Okita playing with their children in the yard. She grew excited herself, her mind creating images she so desired. Only one question remained.

>"But Chizuru-chan." she pleaded. "How will I get him alone?"
Chizuru stopped her excited hop and stared at Asuka, her mind racing through all the options available.
>"Don't worry Asuka-chan." a devious smile crossed Chizuru's usually innocent lips. "I have a plan" she giggled.<p>

/

Asuka's heart was pounding as she approached the two men. Okita and Nagakura had finished their daily exercise bout and were both leaning against the wall panting, sweat running rivulets down their bare chests.

>I hope your plan works Chizuru.

Asuka's palms felt sweaty and tense as she approached the two men, on closer inspection she noticed that Okita had regained much of his colour in the last few days, relief swept over her, she had been concerned by his pale and lifeless appearance in the weeks gone by.

Nagakura made a visible effort to straighten his back as she approached, while Okita indifferently lifted his head to look at her.

>"Asuka-chan" Nagakura said too loudly, blushing a deeper shade of red, "What brings you here?"
Okita looked at Nagakura, at first surprised before a knowing smirk crossed his face.

>"Iâ€¦I'm here to ask Okita-san something." Asuka said, before pointedly glaring at Nagakura, willing him to go away.
Silence fell on the small group, Nagakura staring at Asuka.

>"Oh" he stammered, "I see." Nagakura's shoulders slumped as he realised Asuka's intent, "I'll leave you to it then." He mumbled as he walked off with a sulk, his dragging feet leaving a visible trail in the loose gravel.<p>

Okita's eyes met Asuka, she was nervous and he felt himself grow uneasy under her piercing stare.

>"Okita-sanâ€¦" Asuka said sweetly, "I would love it if you could accompany me to the festival in town tonight."
He didn't answer, just looking at her enquiringly, his eyes boring into her, Asuka felt like she had to elaborate.

>"The word in town has it that there are some great performances, flame eaters, jugglers and a brilliant acrobatics show, the food is said to be wonderful and there will be a fireworks display andâ€¦andâ€¦" Asuka felt silly rambling on, when a thought came to her, "I would be safer with you accompanying me, there are such horrible rumours going around about gangs andâ€¦"
_Am I fighting a

loosing battle? Why isn't he answering? _Asuka battled to think of more reasons to convince Okita.

"Sure" Okita shrugged, "We can leave at sunset." He shoved himself off the wall and started walking towards his room, leaving an excited and dazed Asuka behind.

_He said yes! _Asuka celebrated in silence, her pulse throbbing and her limbs shaking with excitement. _Tonight is going to be perfect. _Asuka's thoughts shouted at her as she skipped back to the main house, planning her outfit, hair and words for the night.

/

Okita didn't like festivals, too many people gathered in a small space, drunk, unruly. It was unsafe for someone like himself, there were many in Kyoto looking for shinsengumi blood, but it also gave him a chance to leave the property without question.

Sannan-san knew, he had told him about his saviour, about her visits, the times she had saved him, he had not told Sannan about his body succumbing to this cursed disease or the green vials that she brought him, that the foul liquid seemed to be his only hope.

>Sannan hadn't been pleased with the situation and had told Okita to stop any contact with "this woman". Okita hadn't liked how Sannan had said that, with suspicion and anger, referring to her like she was the enemy, foul and deceptive. Okita knew that it was not the truth...and now, he had to be careful, he had no doubt Sannan was keeping a close eye on him.<p>

Asuka's invitation came at the perfect time, he would still make his meeting tonight, under the Cherry Tree he would wait for her, Okita could feel his heart race at the thought of meeting her, his palms sweaty as his hand slipped when opening his bedroom door, he could not even entertain the thought of her not revealing herself, it wouldn't happen, she would be there.

/

Kasumi let out a loud sneeze as she clapped her hands together, sending a cloud of chalk dust into her face. Checking the strapping on her hands and wrists for the last time, she nodded in satisfaction, Oba-chan had done them well. She smiled at the thought of the old woman recounting her own youthful days as an acrobat.

>She spoke of grand performances in front of Royalty and Service men, the fame of being the best acrobat in Japan, how men, and some women, lusted after her lithe body. Kasumi giggled. You were quite the vixen in your time Oba-chan.

Kasumi's thoughts went to her own jaded heart and where it lay.

>Okita-dono. She knew it was dangerous, that she shouldn't meet him, she still had panicked moments where she imagined the worst that could happen. A soft smile crossed her lips. _Will you approve of me?_

"I don't like that smile on your face." Shinji grunted as he came to stand next to her. "Are you ready?" he asked looking up at the towering installation of bamboo that was their playground.

>"Yes" Kasumi answered, "Just need Oba-chan to touch up my make-up." she said as she lifted herself from her seat, exquisite white costume fluttering in the early evening breeze, white ribbons intertwined in her long hair like delicate ivy. She walked from him, not looking back as he shouted at her, something about rigging.<p>

"Oba-chan" she found the old lady not far from where she had been seated.

>"Yes dear?"
"Time for the final touches." Kasumi smiled.

>"Ah! And so it is." the old woman turned to her, make-up kit in hand, "Sit Sumi-chan...let us paint you." she giggled.<p>

The old woman sang softly as she applied the thick layers of stage make-up, carefully painting Kasumi's face and neck a few shades lighter as low notes left her lips, tracing the heavy charcoal stick along the contours of her eyes to finishing with intricate patterns on her temples, accentuated by high pitched syllables of song, blue powder glittered on her eye lids when Oba-chan finished with her full lips, colouring them a deep cerulean blue, ending her song with a soft, reverent hum.

"There you go Sumi-chan." the old woman proclaimed proudly as she stood back to inspect her own handiwork. "You are ready." she sang out loudly.

Kasumi stood up, feeling her legs buckle slightly, she grabbed onto the old woman's frail arm, her chalked hands leaving white marks where they touched.

>"Nervous dear?" the woman asked worriedly.
"Yes...I suppose...but don't worry Oba-chan, I'll be fine once I'm up there." Kasumi said cheerfully, pointing at the now illuminated installation.

In her heart Kasumi knew it was only a half-truth, she was nervous, but not for the performance. There was a solitary cherry tree waiting for her, when the moon reached it's highest point, her heart fluttered at the thought.

Kasumi shook her head, trying to rid herself of later's problems.

>For now she had to become someone else, Yuki-Onna, Lady of the Mist, Spirit of Snow.<p>

She straightened her back and slowly walked to where Shinji was waiting, carrying herself proudly, confidently she took his outstretched hand and they walked into the performance ring as one. Her heart raced with excitement, her soul rejoicing from the knowledge that soon she would be flying through the sky, all her worries and aches left behind for the brief moments that she was transformed into someone else, became one with the air, light as a feather. Nothing could stop her, nothing could take away the joy and freedom that came with flight.

I am Yuki-Onna, Mistress of Mist, Spirit of Snow, and I am here to paint the skies for you.

9. Chapter 9 - Flight and Fall

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* * *

<p>Chapter 8

It was too crowded, jostling bodies brushed up against him and he often felt the warm breath of a stranger sweep his neck, sending unwanted shivers down his back, Okita hated where he was.

"Come" Asuka exclaimed as she took his arm and tugged him through the throng to the center of the festival. Okita felt uncomfortable with the familiarity that Asuka showed when she touched him, it felt wrong, his heart told him it was reserved for someone else.

He sighed and for the umpteenth time he considered if he had done the right thing. Asuka was naïve, innocent and he had engineered a possible heartbreaking moment for her. His slight frown went unnoticed by the excited Asuka as they made it to the clearing, a towering bamboo installation dominating the evening sky.

White and blue pennants fluttered from the rig's highest points, the evening breeze playing an enthused game of tag with the evading silks and cottons. Long ribbons flowed from the lower sections of the poles, gently folding in upon themselves as they too danced to the wind's rhythm, occasionally catching the firey glints of the lamps dotted around the structure.

>Okita could only stare in awe, never had he seen such a large or high acrobatic rig and his respect was already gained by the artists that would be gracing the stilts in a few moments.<p>

They appeared. A man and woman dressed in costume, tails of blue and white ribbons flowing from them just like the structure's own. He could not help but stare as the woman came forward, pride, strength peppered with an alluring sway of her hips marked her stride. Confidence surrounded her, so much so that her partner seemed to fade into the dusk, her flame snuffing his in an instant.

>Okita wasn't close enough to see the details, but he was sure she would be beautiful, if in front of him. He was distracted by a shrill squeak from Asuka.<p>

"They're performing the tale of Yuki-Onna" she exclaimed, "My mother use to scare me with the story when I was a child, she always said Yuki-Onna would catch and whisk me away if I went out alone at night." she let out a small giggle as she gave Okita a seductive look. "At least I know I will be safe from her when you are with me...Okita-san."

>Okita could only shake his head as he watched the girl hopping around, her eyes showing her excitement and intent, she reminded him of a child, innocent and unaware of how cruel the world is, playing a game she did not understand.
"Look, Look, they're starting." she let out, pointing at the acrobats. Okita's eyes followed the direction her fingers pointed, watching as the acrobats climbed to the top of the bamboo poles.

A low gasp rippled through the crowd as both acrobats took their positions, the woman easily balancing her body weight with her one arm as she flipped to a handstand, the man snaring his foot into a loop attached to a complicated knot of ropes. Anticipation crackled through the air as every man, woman and child waited in silence, the acrobats frozen in place, tension throbbing through their muscles. A solitary whizzing sound took everyone by surprise before the sparks

and colours of a firework bloomed in the night, outlining the acrobats as they launched themselves into the air, defying the very sky with their actions.

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****_The Tale of Yuki-Onna_****

A long time ago, in an unnamed village, there lived two woodcutters, Minokichi and Mosaku. Minokichi was young and handsome, Mosaku was an old man, who had lived a long, challenging life.

On a day in mid-winter, they found themselves trapped by a harsh snowstorm, with no way to return home from the forest, they took shelter in an old abandoned hut. As they slept a beautiful woman returned to the hut she had once shared with her family, they had died a horrible death here and the hut only brought saddened memories to the woman.

Mosaku awoke during the night and found the beautiful woman there, she was dressed only in white and her lips were tinted blue, her hair the colour of the night itself. As he came close to her she gently breathed on Mosaku, freezing his lifeblood and so taking his life.

_She heard Minokichi let out a gasp and knew that he had woken. She approached him so she could take his life as well, but found herself mesmerised by his beauty.

>"I thought I would kill you, like the old man, but I will not, for you are young, handsome and full of life." She whispered in Minokichi's ear, "You must not tell anyone about me or I will be forced to kill you." With that she disappeared in a cloud of mist.

Many years past and Minokichi never uttered a word of his encounter. On a cold winter's morning he met Oyuki, a beautiful woman that immediately enchanted his heart. He asked for her hand, which she accepted, and they married soon after. She gave him many beautiful children and loved him like no other, she was the perfect wife.

_One night Minokichi looked at his wife and smiled.

>"Why are you smiling so beautifully my dear husband?" Oyuki asked.
"Whenever I see you, I am reminded of a mysterious woman I met once. I was young and I met her on a cold winter's night like this one. I do not know if it was a dream or Yuki-Onna herself."_

After finishing the tale, Oyuki suddenly stood up and said, "That woman you met was me, I told you that I would have to kill you if you ever uttered a single breath of what happened that night." A single icy tear rolled over her cheek as she wept at her own words, "I can not, for our children would never forgive me, but I can not stay here, my oath to kill you will always haunt my sad soul." with those words she left into the evening mist, never to be seen again, although it is said her cries can be heard on the wind during cold winter nights.

/

Okita was spellbound.

>The acrobats danced through the air like he danced with his sword, fluid and effortless, creating a painfully beautiful tale of two lovers bound to never be together.
He had never seen the tale of Yuki-Onna in this incarnation, the plight of a solitary soul yearning for companionship, betrayed by the one she loved, his heart ached for her, she was not the monster that everyone thought, she was merely alone.

The acrobats were sure footed and their agility was a marvel, the woman could weave through the air and bend her limbs like the branches of a willow, she could control not only her limbs but the ribbons of her costume, to paint glorious moments of pure emotion. More than once Okita found himself unable to breathe as she graced the air with a gravity and body defying motion. He stared, unable to take his eyes off of the performance, sure he would never see anything like it again.

/

The evening was perfect, the light breeze allowing Kasumi to make the ribbons on her costume twirl and flutter like they were extensions of her limbs. The air on her cheeks, refreshing, made her mind clear and focused. All there was, was the next stretch of her limbs, the next arch of her back, Shinji's strong arms or hand to grasp. Here she found peace, all her worries and thoughts whisked away by the wind sweeping through her hair.

She opened her eyes as she came close to the ground, Shinji having swung her low to prepare for a devilishly high execution of a mid-air somersault.

>Her gaze fleeted over the crowd, enjoying the amazed stares she was inspiring, on a whim she looked deeper into the crowd and her heart jolted for an instant.
"Okita-dono" his name escaped her lips in a whisper.

Momentarily flustered, she had to re-take her grip on the body ribbon, her heart pounding at the realisation that he was there. She couldn't help but smile as her body was launched into the air, her blood surging as she vowed to make her execution perfect, she could not falter, she had to be faultless if he was there watching her. Her body arched and twirled in the sky, ribbons unhurriedly following the curve her body made, creating a blossom of blue and white cloth. Her feet landed on the upright support with a thud, a small cloud of chalk puffing from where they connected, her gaze immediately went to where she knew Okita was standing, her eyes searching as she waited for Shinji to finish his tumbles and swings as Minokichi.

She found him without effort, she could recognise him from any distance. He was there, the young servant girl from the Shinsengumi compound next to him. He was looking up, the same amazed expression the rest of the crowd wore graced his face. _Is he looking at me? Does he know?

>Her heart raced at the thought. _He doesn't, but soon...soon he will. _A smile tugged at her lips, she was ready.

She looked on as the serving girl grabbed his arm to get his attention.

>She watched as his shoulders slumped and he looked down to the woman next to him.
She saw the woman twine her arms around his neck and

pull him closer.
>She witnessed as their lips met.<p>

Kasumi's world crumbled.

/

Shinji watched as Kasumi did her aerial dance with the black body ribbon, twisting and twirling, manipulating the fabric like only she could. Her long legs kicked out as her body arched through the air, her arms intertwined in the ribbon like the lifeline it was, the audience oblivious to the danger she faced. He watched the breathtaking vision that was Kasumi, flying through the sky with the freedom that only birds should have, and witnessed the most perfect execution he had ever seen, ending with her elegant landing on a support beam.

She was looking at the crowd when her shoulders stiffened and unwanted tension flexed in her arms. He was puzzled as he tried to signal her to join him, she did not react, something was wrong.

Moments later relief came to him as he swung down and saw her start her next set, he twirled the brace that held his arm, the next set of moves was the reason they had come here, the reason they would perform for the Shogun. He readied himself for a mid-air twirl and catch that would make the audience gasp and applaud, make them talk for days to come.

He braced himself as Kasumi's body arched in the air before starting slow measured twirls towards their mid-air meeting.
>He was prepared as she looked towards him in mid flight, tears streaking down her cheeks, heavy black trails of makeup smudging her face, for a moment she looked like the real Yuki-Onna, heart broken.<p>

Shinji panicked. _What's wrong? Is she hurt? _His mind raced for answers, his concentration slipped, he had lost speed.

In a single moment, everything changed.

As Kasumi reached the height of her arc, Shinji realised that she did not have enough momentum, she reached out to him without luster, neither of them were where they should have been. She merely brushed the tips of his fingers, no grip, no stability. Shinji felt her slip through his fingers for a second time in his life.

Kasumi plummeted, her dance coming to a swift end.

/

Asuka ran through the crowd, blinded by her own tears. She felt ashamed, rejected...angry. She shoved people aside as she ran, not caring who she angered, she had to get away from here, from him.

Okita had rejected her, shoved her away when she had given him her first kiss, what angered her the most was that he had been nice about it. No harsh or mean words or startled actions, just a gentle shove to separate them and soft kind words.

>"Asuka-chan, this is not what I want, I am not the right man for you and I do not doubt you would know that if you truly knew me..." he had been silent for a few moments, _"My heart belongs to someone else, I am sorry..."

>The thought of his words brought a new wave of sobs and Asuka struggled to breathe as she lumbered forward in a sea of uncaring faces.

"Asuka-chan?" she heard her name from a distance. Strong hands came to rest on her shoulders, holding her steady and protecting her from the crowd. "Are you alright?" the concerned voice became clearer as her tears faded.

>She turned, her eyes red and puffy, something inside her still hoping it would be Okita. "Nagakura-san?" she said confused, "What are you doing here?"
"I like festivals, so I came." he shrugged, "I saw you running and I thought something was wrong." his eyes spoke of his worry for her and Asuka's heart steadied, without a thought Asuka fell into his arms, embracing him with all her might.

>"Nagakura-san, I'm so happy to see you." she said with a few last tears running down her cheeks.<p>

Okita-san, you never cease to amaze me. How did you know this would happen? Thank You. Nagakura smiled as he thought of his friend's insistence that he should be here tonight. Shaking his head he took Asuka in his arms and led her to a quieter section of the festival, his mind trying to fathom how Okita had orchestrated this meeting and what he was supposed to do next.

/

Thud. Crack. Gasp.

The crowd let out their collective held breath in unison.

>The bird had fallen from the sky in what seemed slow motion, the ribbons of her costume whipping and twining in a panicked flutter, contrarily she did not struggle or even protect herself as she limply fell to the ground below.<p>

Okita joined the masses in a horrified gaze, the woman's body laying crumpled on the ground, she seemed lifeless until a gut-wrenching scream left her lips, blood curdled as the air escaped her lungs in pain laced gasps. The crowd lurched forward in macabre fascination, curiosity overruling common sense as all wanted to see what the outcome of the fall had been.

He had heard bones shatter as she connected with the ground in a cloud of dust, he winced when he heard her agonising gasps, he knew some of the pain she felt at that moment and his fists clenched in sympathy as her partner knelt down to touch her body.

>Yet, she was alive and the limpness of her fall seemed to have been her saving grace.<p>

Okita looked on as men rushed forward with a litter to carry her from this place, carefully placing it next to her now straightened body. His quick glance at her form told him that her ribs were broken but amazingly it seemed that the rest of her was intact. Blood covered her face, neck and arms, blue bruises clearly forming on her chest and visible through her now torn costume.

>A torturous whelp left her body as they lifted her onto the

litter, blood instantly staining the untreated calico with flowers of red.<p>

They all watched in silence as she was taken away, speechless at what had happened. After a few moments the crowd started to leave, slowly they melded with the rest of the festival, their evenings far from over, the acrobat soon to be forgotten. Only Okita was left in the now empty clearing.

>"Are you alright my dear?" an old crackly voice came from behind him.
Okita turned to see an old lady, nervously wringing her hands as she stared at the large bamboo structure.

>"It happened so fast, it's not like Sumi-chan to lose concentration, something must have happened up there..." she sighed and looked at Okita, "Sorry young man, I had asked if you were alright, it must have been quite a shock."
Okita could see the worry in her eyes and instantly felt his heart go out to the old woman.

>"I am fine oba-chan, I have seen much worse in my line of work."
"Oh?" the old woman was silent for a few moments, "That is very sad to hear."

Taken aback by her words, Okita could only stare at the wrinkled woman.

>"The young ones of today live with too much burden and sorrow, Sumi-chan also has that look in her eyes, the one that says you know death, you spend too much time around it. Let us hope that death will not be the truth for Sumi-chan tonight" with that the old woman grew silent and gave Okita a look that bore down to his soul.
"I...I have to leave...for a meeting..." Okita stammered, thrown off by the old woman's eyes and words.

>"Yes my dear, take care and don't let death make you blind to the opportunity to find happiness." sadness and understanding lined the old woman's words.<p>

Okita turned and left as quickly as was polite, the old woman had made him uncomfortable in the matter of seconds and he truly had a meeting. He looked up at the sky and judged by the moon that there was still some time before he had to be in the park. His heart instantly lightened at the thought of his mystery woman, the thought of the broken acrobat washed away with excitement and happiness. _Tonight I will know who you are, I will see you, I will smell you.

>For the first time in his life, Okita felt his heart race at such a speed that it might explode, his feet light and swift, his body filled with a tension that felt astounding. _Tonight I will meet the woman who has stolen my heart. _He smiled at the thought.

10. Chapter 10 - Disappointment and Fear

**I don't own Hauouki or any of it's characters.**

* * *

><p>Chapter 9

Okita paced, his soft footfalls beating a rhythmic path in the mossy grass. The time he had proposed was long , his mind could not accept that she was not coming, that she did not feel like he did. _She will come._ Countless excuses for her not being there swam in his head, none of them convincing.

He stopped to stare at the moon above, hoping his sense of time had been wrong, it was not. A long sigh left his lips and his nervous pacing commenced, trying his best to convince himself that all was not lost.

Finally the sound of birds ushering in the early dawn broke his resolve, his heart breaking as the first rays of light peeked over the horizon.

>I was wrong. With a heavy heart he slowly trudged down the incline that the Cherry Tree reigned over, caught in his own miserable thoughts he did not notice the old woman steadily walking up the rise.

"You are still here young man?" she asked with puzzlement.

>Her voice brought Okita back to reality, at first confused, he tried to recall where he knew the old woman from.
"Last night my dear." she reminded him, "After Sumi-chan's fall."

>"Oh...yes," he murmured. "Forgive my forgetfulness oba-chan, I've been...distracted."
"Well you are still here, it must have been quite the distraction." she gave him a toothy grin.

>"Unfortunately not like I would have liked it to be."<p>

"Oh?"

Okita's head drooped even lower, "I hoped to meet someone hereâ€|they did not come."

>"Why did they not come?" she asked.
"I can only assume they did not want toâ€|"

"And why would you assume that? I am sure there are many reasons why she could not be here, not 'wanting to' being only one." The old woman noticed a flash of hope cross Okita's face and a faint smile gracing his lips.

>"You could be right oba-chan, I shouldn't be so fast to judge"
"That's right young man, there's always hope, always a reason." She smiled as she saw Okita's posture straighten.

>"Thank you oba-chan, you have lightened my heart." Okita gave the old woman a slight bow, as he turned to leave his thoughts recalled the injured performer of the previous evening, "Oba-chan, is the woman from last nightâ€|is she going to recover?"
"Sumi-chan is a fighter." The woman smiled, "Her injuries were not as severe as they seemed, she has not regained consciousness but recovering all the same."

>"That is good to hear, she is a remarkable acrobat, it would be a great loss if she could not perform again." Okita's sincere words brought an unseen tear to the old woman.
"That she is, young man, she is great at many things." she sighed. "It is tragic when such beauty is marred."

>"Indeed." Okita agreed.<p>

The old woman looked up at him, her eyes large with worry. "Will you be the saviour?"

>Okita blinked in confusion, not understanding what she was asking of him.
"No matter young man." her voice laced with a sigh. "I should not interfere."

>"Oba-chan?" the confused Okita uttered.
"I should leave." The old woman cut her sentence short as she shuffled forward. "Only time will tell my dear." she said in a near whisper as she passed him, her

gnarled hand momentarily resting on his arm.

He could only stare as she climbed up the rise, confused by the old woman's abrupt exit.

/

"O...ki...ta...do...no."

Shinji heard the name leave her lips in a desperate whisper. His brow wrinkled into a frown. It was the third time the name had come from her, and now, Shinji was certain he had heard it correctly.

Who was this person? What were they to Kasumi?

He looked down at her sleeping figure, her fine features set in a grimace. It was a miracle that she was alive, the fall would have killed anyone else, but the training they had endured kicked in, they had been taught how to fall, to relax their bodies and Kasumi did exactly that, even in a panicked state._ Always so perfect Kasumi, even in dying?

>She had survived the fall with a few broken ribs, arm and a multitude of cuts and sprains, yet she was alive and seemed more preoccupied with this _Okita-dono_ than her own injuries.

"Is he the one that is keeping you from me, the reason you slip away at night?" Shinji's hand softly traced her cheek and jaw. "Why, why will you not love me anymore?" His hand came to rest on her neck, her pulse beating strongly against his palm, even broken as she was.

"How is our patient?" the old woman asked as she came through the tent's entrance. Shinji turned with a start, jerking his hand away from Kasumi.

>The old woman made him uncomfortable, her eyes always on him, like she knew who he really was, knew the real reason he and Kasumi had joined the travelling troupe.
"She'll be fine oba-chan, a lot of pain, but fine...It's Kasumi" he shrugged as if that mere fact would explain everything.

>He gave the old woman a respectful half-smile before he pushed past her to leave.<p>

The old woman watched his exit with disdain. "Sometimes I wonder how well you really know her..." the old woman uttered as she watched Shinji's form disappear into the camp.

Her gaze turned to the young woman. "You carry much in your heart Kasumi-chan." she sighed, "... including a very handsome young man, one that does not seem to know who you are..." the woman's lips curled into a small, knowing smile, "I see everything Kasumi-chan, especially those things you try to hide most."

/

Isami Kondo was anxious, a feeling he was not familiar with. His bare feet thumped heavily on the common room floor as he paced, he could not place his worry, didn't know what the root of it was, and that, made him worry even more.

After weeks of no word, Susumu had sent an alarming message, one

filled with fear and angst, telling of some unknown threat. He had failed in his assassination mission and had returned with only half of his squad. Never had Kondo heard of Susumu's people failing.

>"Kondo-dono" Hijikata's deep voice pierced through his thoughts.
"Yes Toshi?"
>"Heisuke-san has sent a messenger." Hijikata noticed Kondo's shoulders stiffen.
"Yes? What news?"
>"He says Susumu-san has arrived in the outer reaches of the province, he'll be joining him in travelling here, it would seem Susumu is injured Shushou."
A frown swept over Kondo's face. "We need Susumu here as soon as possible and, safely. He carries important news with him." Kondo's eyes spoke of his worry as he looked at his second-in-command. "There is trouble coming Toshi, I can feel it in my bones..."

Hijikata stared at his commander for a few moments, his face not betraying his emotions.
>"I know Kondo-dono, I can feel it as well, the unrest in the air, the smell of blood."<p>

A long silence fell between the two men, each staring at the others' face, hearts pounding, thoughts tugging them deeper into their contemplations.
>After what seemed hours, Kondo's head lifted from his stare.<p>

"We should prepare Toshi." he gave Hijikata a knowing stare. "War is coming."

11. Chapter 11 - Distress and Worry

I do not own Hakuouki or it's characters, Kasumi is mine though!

* * *

><p>Unfortunately this chapter is long over due :(Delayed = Life happened.
I hope you enjoy it though, this fanfic has grown from a planned 9 chapter tale to...well I'm not sure, it keeps on growing. It's just as much a journey for me as it is for anyone who reads it. I can however say that a fateful meeting will take place soon :D
:D

* * *

><p>Chapter 10

Five days had passed since Okita waited under the tree, the last three marked with the lack of a green vial and it's soothing fire . Okita clearly felt the disease in his lungs again, the painful gargle in his deeper breaths causing him to feel intensely nauseous.

A forlorn expression beset his face as he stared out the window at the courtyard outside, the snow was all but gone now and most of the plants and trees were painted in their respective colours. For all the beauty, he was blinded, his heart aching more than the illness in his lungs.

>At first he had believed she had not cared to meet him, but as the days passed and there was no nightly visit or potion, his fear for her increased. Now he had convinced himself that she was in danger

and he was helpless, he did not even know her face, let alone her name, he could do nothing for her. A harsh sigh left his lips as he slammed his palm on the windowsill. Frustrated.<p>

Asuka lightly skipped into view, Nagakura following close behind, since the festival night they had been near inseparable, clearly infatuated with each other.

>"At least that worked out." Okita whispered to himself. He watched as Nagakura made her giggle in delight with a mere sentence, she gave him a meaningful smile before she wrapped her arms around his waist, he threw a quick glance around the courtyard before gently curling an arm around her shoulder, they strolled towards the solitary bench on the far side of the courtyard, adamant not to be seen by the other Shinsengumi.<p>

_Where are you? Are you safe? _These questions milled in Okita's mind, making any other thought nearly impossible. One thing he knew for sure: who ever she was, she was capable of getting herself in grave trouble. His mind conjured multitudes of grim scenarios, all ending in blood, her blood.

His thoughts were interrupted by an excited shout from the courtyard, Asuka's voice piercing the blue sky like a lance.

>Okita's attention was drawn to the large gate opening, letting Heisuke and a clearly limping Susumu through. Asuka ran up to greet her friends, excited and alarmed by Susumu's struggling gait.
A frantic flutter of arms ensued as Asuka overreacted to Susumu's injuries, even from afar she tired him and Okita let out yet another sigh as he watched Susumu untangle himself from her clumsy aiding hands.

Slowly he moved from his windowed view, strained footsteps leading him to the common room where he was sure all would gather soon, Susumu's news would be important and even in his depressed state, Okita could feel the urgency that now filled the air.

/

"Ouch, fuck!" Kasumi complained as the old woman pulled the wrappings tighter around her abdomen.

>"Now my dear, watch your tongue" the woman chastised with a smile.
"Easy for you to say, oba-chan" she muttered under painful breaths.

Shinji could only smile as he listened to the two women, hidden, he stood on the closed side of the tent, the conversation taking him back to a time when he was the one grumbling in pain.

_ - x - _

He had lived on the farm all 14 years of his life, used to hard labour and heavy punishment, he was strong for his years, with this knowledge he strolled onto the training grounds, radiating misguided confidence.

He came to a halt at his designated spot in the clearing and trailed his eyes over his likely opponents, they all looked weak in his eyes and a grin spread across his face as he felt his confidence grow tenfold. "I'll crush you all, privileged weaklings."

_The day's bouts started, testing skill, endurance and strength.

>He watched as, one by one, the candidates were pitted against each other, culling the weak from the strong, the tacticians from the brutes, each match ending with a bloodied loser and an elated victor.

_"Kanzaki Shinji...Kanzaki Shinji?" it took him a few moments to realise that he was being called, his newly assumed identity still unfamiliar to him.

>He stepped forward, beaming confidence as he slowly removed his shirt to reveal his lean, hardened muscles.
"Kasumi-chan" the instructor called._

_From the crowd a girl appeared, tall and beautiful, Shinji could only stare as she came closer to the fighting ring. She stopped in the center of the rough bloodied patch of earth, staring him in the eye, only then did he realise they meant him to fight her.

>"I...I can't..." he stammered. "She's...a she, girl, I mean." he shook his head in disbelief.
A rich laugh came from her lips and filled the air with it's sweet music, her left eyebrow arched as she looked at him with a grin on her face.

>"You afraid...boy?" she teased. "Afraid I might beat you?"
"No!" he shouted. "It's just that...well you're a girl." Shinji felt rage building in his veins as he looked at the over confident girl in front of him.

>"My...you are observant" she chuckled. "Now come! I don't want to miss lunch." she ordered as she took a defensive stance.
"I...can't" he shouted.

>"Fine then!" she shouted back.

_As nimble as a cat, she launched her body from her defensive position into a full on assault, before Shinji could react her feet connected squarely with his chest, he felt his knees buckle as the air was forced from his lungs, the side of her palm connected with his neck moments later and a final blow came to his nose before darkness took him.

>As his body connected with the red sand of the ring, he could hear her laugh again, a gasp escaped the surrounding crowd.
That moment had taught him never to underestimate the enemy and never be over confident._

_Later she came to him and gave him a sympathetic, if excruciating pat on the back.

>"Don't let it get you down, I cheated." she whispered in his ear, gave him a sly wink and jumped from her seat like a gazelle. As he watched her leisurely stroll away, he knew she had lied, she had not cheated.
That moment Kasumi stole his heart._

_ - x - _

"I'm fine oba-chan, stop fretting." Shinji recognized the annoyance in her voice, also the lie. Kasumi was in pain and most probably she was not fine, something besides her broken bones was troubling her.

>Shinji's frown marred his face as his thoughts returned to the name she had called out in her pain-filled haze.<p>

"Okita" he growled to himself.

Feeling his temper rise he made to leave, determined to find this man.

>I will find you and I will rid Kasumi of you.

/

"Hijikata-dono, Kondo-Shushou." Susumu bowed down slowly, never one to forget his manners.

>"Please Susumu, don't strain yourself, get up." Kondo ordered, worry clear in his tone.
"Yes Shushou" Susumu grunted as he tried to straighten his aching body.

>"What news do you bring?" Hijikata's voice was strained and carried a strange high pitch as he asked, the tension of the last few days showing itself in earnest.
"It...I...I lost half of my team..." Susumu's head fell despondently, silence filling the room. Hijikata winced as he saw the heartache and disappointment in Susumu's face, his friend was broken, in more ways than one.

"Tell us Susumu-san." Kondo's voice broke the silence with distinct sympathy, it amazed Hijikata how this man, his captain, could convey so much in a mere sentence, no long meetings or speeches were ever needed, Kondo-dono just combined all of their thoughts in two words, and gave Susumu exactly what he needed.

>I have much to learn before I am ready to be a commander , Hijikata thought to himself as he listened to Susumu's report.

Shock. Anger. Worry.

>Hijikata felt all of these as Susumu's report unfolded. A quick glance across the room told him that his captains, friends felt the same. The silence that followed was deafening as they all digested what they had been told.<p>

"As a last resort..." Susumu spoke up again, his report seemingly not over. "...the Shogunate has ordered a full offensive against the Mori Clan, starting 8 days from now." another stunned silence.

>"All troops and operatives will meet at the eastern border of the Province Aki, where more detail orders will be given by the Shogunate representatives." Susumu bowed slightly to his leaders, indicating that his report was done.<p>

"...Toshi..."

>"Yes Shushou?"
"Get the men ready, we travel in four days, as the sun rises...Okita, Saito, Harada, stay here for a few moments." with that Hijikata sprang into action, barking orders even before he had left the room, his heart pounding in his chest.

>The three Shinsengumi were left staring at their leader, now a complete different man to the one of a few minutes before, his grim face set with an unknown determination.
"Susumu?" Kondo looked at the last of the unsummoned Shinsengumi still in the room, his brow raised in question.

>"I shall gather my operatives Shushou, we will need their skills, I will meet you at the border."
A faint flicker of a smile flitted over Kondo's face. "You are a strong man Susumu-dono, even after your loss, your injuries, you are still willing to sacrifice more. Let that be an example to all Shinsengumi."

>Susumu bowed his head in awe as he realised the honour he had just been bestowed. "I will leave at day break Shushou."
Kondo nodded a smile as Susumu limped from the room. "Now...shall we begin with

assessing what we have?" Kondo turned to his men, resolute.

12. Chapter 12 - Heat and Pain

The stifling heat simmered on the horizon as the sun beat the earth with fisted rays, hot dust swirled around weary legs as the lines of Shinsengumi regiments trampled the already worn road to the border.

>Hijikata flicked an annoying drop of sweat from his eye, cursing inwardly at his own discomfort. They were moving slow, most of the Shinsengumi enduring the many miles of traveling on foot, only the captains and higher ranking Shinsengumi were privileged enough to have a horse to ride, but horse or not, the heat still beat on them all the same.<p>

Hijikata stopped under a tree, taking in the shade as he waited for his regiment to catch up to him. Surveying the troops as they trailed into the distance he noticed Okita veering off into the forest on the edge of the path.

>Worry flitted across his face as he watched, it was not the first time that day that Okita had broken the line, something was wrong, Hijikata was certain he looked paler each time he returned to the troops.<p>

They needed him at his best, not only as one of the best swordsmen alive, but also as a friend, as an adviser. Okita's sharp eye and keen judgment had saved them more than once, be it in a fight or personal matter.

>Yes, they needed him, there was no telling what lay ahead in the next few days. Fear nipped at the edges of Hijikata's mind as he stared at the opening into the forest that Okita used seconds before.<p>

"You've noticed too." Sannan's voice came from behind him, deep and insightful, laced with a twinge of worry himself.

>"Do you know?" Hijikata simply asked as he turned to Sannan.
"No, but he has been acting strangely for some time now." A thoughtful silence followed before Sannan continued. "At first I thought he had fallen prey to a drug, but then he told me it was a woman."

>"A woman?" shock rang in Hijikata's voice.
"She saved him, at least that's what he claims. I rebuked him, banned him from contacting her...I suspect there is more to this than a simple infatuation though." Both men found themselves staring at the empty spot, an uneasy silence fell between them, saying more than words could.

Sannan cleared his throat to chase away the silence.

>"He seems to have developed some kind of ailment since thenâ€|maybeâ€|maybe I had made a mistake in forbidding the relationship?"
"Sannan-san, we all know the regulations we accept when we join the Shinsengumi, I doubt Okita-san would simply ignore our rules."

>"I'm not so sure Hijikata-san, he had a look in his eyes that I did not understand, he lookedâ€|desperate, noâ€|it was something else, something I can not place."<p>

They turned to look as Okita returned from the forest, noticeably shaken, he rejoined his regiment, shoulders slumped, head hanging low.

>"We should talk to him tonight, he can not fight like that."
Hijikata yanked his horse's reins, urging the beast into a light trot to rejoin his men.<p>

"I don't think that argument will give Okita-san the encouragement he needs Hijikata-san, he has changed" Sannan whispered to himself as he too turned to join the regiments.

/

The corrosive fire in his chest was unbearable. Okita found it near impossible to breathe as he clung to the reins in his hands, uncontrollable tremors wracked his body, making it difficult to command his horse as he tried to hide his discomfort from his troops.

Six days without any potion had taken it's toll, plagued with worry and fear had not helped either and Okita found himself in the worst shape ever. His few hours of sleep were restless, with visions of blood and death, a rich laugh slowly ebbing away until only silence was left.

>He always hunted the sound, grabbing at it helplessly when he heard it close by, he never managed to take hold of it.<p>

"Okita-san!" Harada's voice sliced through his pain-filled thoughts.

>A strained "Yes?" was all he could manage.
"Are you alright? You look pale." a naughty glint came to his eye as he grinned. "Did you have some of Heisuke's cooking again? You know that could kill you."

>Okita couldn't help but give a half smile as he heard Heisuke's protesting coming from a few feet away.
"Come to think of it Harada-san, I did have some suspicious looking eggs on my plate this morning, I only had a bite before I had to throw it away." Okita tried to pull a disgusted face, enjoying the gasp that came from Heisuke.

>Harada's face instantly turned into one of dismay as he gently put his hand on Okita's shoulder.
"That's all you need me friend." he sighed."Only one bite, I'll make sure your burial is an honourable one."

Okita flinched at the words, even in jest they brought something to mind that was too close to home.

>"Thank you my dearest friend." he said, a strained smile on his lips. "Please make sure that my ungraceful death is avenged." with that he turned from his friends, his chest about to erupt in another barrage of bloody coughs, flicking his reins he trotted off, hoping that he would make it to the tree line in time.<p>

Harada looked on as his friend left, his posture slumped and tired in the saddle.

>"Heisuke-san, something isn't right."
" I know." Heisuke replied with a frown. "Is my cooking really that bad?"

/

Her remarkably fast healing had never let her down. Kasumi was irritated as she picked at the tight bindings around her chest, her body, for once, taking it's time to give her back her mobility.

A last tug on the bandages came with a floral set of swear words, tears stinging at the brim of her eyes. She had to walk, urgency tugged at her as she once again tried to hoist herself from the hard pallet, pain sliced through her body as she came up from her seat, her chest straining against the bandages and her own skin. She felt a single tear run down her cheek as she finally straightened her legs and gingerly placed her weight on her hips and feet, a loud grunt coming from her tight lips.

She stood, moments trudging by as she waited for the pain to subside, her breath coming in short gasps, her mind racing through a plethora of emotions she had yet to deal with.

Then...

Her heart broke once more, as she saw Okita and Asuka, arms wrapped around each other, lips gently touching. Her breath hitched, her mind clamped down on the memory and snuffed it, sending it back to the furthest reaches of her mind.

>A long breath followed, she had other troubles.<p>

Finally regaining some of her composure she looked down at the ciphered note she had found under her pillow earlier.

>The small piece of paper contained instructions, orders she did not necessarily like.
She had to leave.

>Her newly found friends had to be discarded so she could do what she was made for, the same cycle repeating itself as she would vanish into the evening dusk, never to be seen again. She sighed as she contemplated her next move, packing, sneaking off, stealing a horse.<p>

The long distance travel to the Aki Province would not be pleasant either, her body was not yet ready for the non-stop ride, nor the dangers that she would face alone. She only had four days to make the journey and once she arrived she was certain there would be no rest, the situation sounded urgent, it was very rare for her to be recalled into direct battle. She tried to flex her tired muscles as she re-read the last few sentences.

It was a rebuke for her injuries, but even in the harsh words she could feel the worry and care, a smile graced her full lips as she thought of the brotherly love she enjoyed from her Commander.

>He was a strong willed and intelligent man with many worries and responsibilities weighing on his shoulders, still he made time for her, even if it was only to shout in writing. She often wondered if he did the same for others, if his compassion embraced more than just a few.<p>

"Sumi-chan!" the old woman scurried towards her . "You're up" she grinned as she inspected Kasumi from closer, carefully touching her sides.

>"I am oba-chan, I can't be lying around like a lazy neko forever."
The old woman laughed, her face wrinkling even more.

>"I am relieved, your injuries seemed serious...please don't do that EVER again!" a stern look went Kasumi's way as the old woman started an avalanche of chides and advice, making sure Kasumi understood how worried she had been the last few days.<p>

Kasumi listened in silence, taking in the old woman's concern for a

last time, her heart and mind slowly letting go of the support she had found in wrinkled smile and haunched back.

/

_Do they know? How?

>Susumu pondered this as he watched the group of Mori Clan soldiers set up camp for the night.

>From his hiding place he could see the men sharpening their blades and repairing their armour, light banter filling the air around them.
They are certainly preparing for battle, he thought.

Why?

The Mori knew the Shogunate was moving to their border, but he himself had made sure that the information the Mori received was wrong, the main force seemingly would only arrive in a week.

>Why would these men be preparing for battle now? And why here, did they know where the Shogun forces were heading?
Is there a traitor amongst us? _his heart skipped at the dreadful thought.

Preoccupied with these questions, Susumu did not notice the slow, measured breathing a few feet away, the eyes observing him, hatred glinting in the moonlight. The hand eagerly clenching and unclenching a murderous blade.

Susumu rummaged through his satchel, taking out a small map of the area, by the moonlight only he plotted his position and marked it.

>I have to get to Kono-dono. he thought as he stood, leaving his cover he vanished into the night like a ghost.

A whispered voice followed him. "Soon Yamazaki Susumu, soon I'll have my revenge..."

13. Chapter 13 - Remembrance and Suspicions

Chapter 12

She had not been surprised when the old woman had told her that Shinji, was nowhere to be found that morning. He would have received his own orders and as much as they were expected to work together, they weren't a teamâ€|not anymore.

Her thoughts unwillingly went to a time when Shinji and herself were inseparable, a team with no equal, they worked as one, they collaborated, they loved.

>An impulsive smile crossed her lips as she remembered their time together, they were young, she was naïve and trusting, he carried many fears in his soul, fears she could not comprehend. Together they were strong, decisive, unstoppable, they were the envy of the regiment, not only for their effortless teamwork, but also for their love.<p>

Her thoughts floundered as a certain memory flitted into view, Shinji standing in a low-lit room, blood drenched dagger in hand, a dying child at his feet. She could still hear her own low cry as the blood flowed between her toes and made her tabi boots stick to the

floor.

Another memory came—shouting, accusations, Shinji's hand pointing at her as he spewed lies from his angry mouth, her heart shattering with each syllable that hung, smoldering in the air.

Preservation—

He betrayed her to save himself, she understood that, still the lancing ache that his words had brought to her chest would always throb and tremor, her trust in people tarnished.
>His words were strong and accusatory but, Shinji had made a mistake, with his own words he discredited himself, and their Commander immediately understood.
A moment, marked with a swift hand and a brilliant show of skill followed, and he had Shinji pinned, a glinting blade came from nowhere to rest on Shinji's throat as he growled a single word— "Talk."

Truths spilled from Shinji's mouth, truths that revealed how one man's fear and greed led him to betray his comrades, friends and finally, his lover, how he had lied, stolen and killed. After all was reveal and their Commander had made his judgment, Kasumi had been left standing alone in a dark room, confused, betrayed and heartbroken.

Many years have passed since that day and atonement had been harsh for Shinji. His youthful mistake had branded him as untrustworthy, a liar, a thief and had robbed him of something very dear, Kasumi herself.
>He had lost rank, privilege, so many things and often Kasumi wondered why he had not left to seek out something else, a new beginning.<p>

A soft sigh escaped her pursed lips as she looked down from her perched seat at the few horses she had to choose from, they were all workhorses, slow and sturdy, not what she needed. For the first time in her life she felt a guilty pang grip her chest as she thought of stealing something from the travelling troupe, with these people she had found a semblance of peace, if only for a while.

Uncomplicated, untouched by the powers and politics of the nation, they lived for their art, their love, their family bonds. Part of her envied the simplicity of their lives, but she had an undying fire that fueled her soul, an ever-glowing ember that sought adventure.

"I'm sure he's fine dear." The old woman's voice came, dragging Kasumi from her reverie. Referring to Shinji, the old woman had a slight frown as she thought of the young man's sudden disappearance.

>"Maybe he just needed some time to himself, he had quite a scare when you fell, maybe he even blames himself?"
"I doubt that oba-chan." Kasumi smiled. "I've known Shinji for long enough to know that it's always someone else's fault."
>The old woman did not miss the sting in Kasumi's voice.<p>

"I'll see you at dinner oba-chan" Kasumi said as she gingerly climbed from her rocky seat. "I need to go into town."
>"Are you sure that's a good idea Sumi-chan, you are still hurt—"

the old woman's words we're spoken to an open sky as Kasumi walked off, not giving notice to the woman's worry."<p>

/

Susumu clambered from the rocky outcrop, he had made good time and could already see the long column of Shinsengumi in the distance. With a huff of relief he mounted his sturdy horse and lightly nudged it to a trot, he had to reach his friends before nightfall to warn them.

He was still puzzled by the Mori-clan's location and had a suspicion that it was not any coincidence—but that would mean that there was a traitor in their midst, the thought alone sickened him. His uneasiness had encouraged him to send out orders to his own agents, orders to be more observant, to move faster, to find this traitor or even, heaven forbid, traitors.

As his horse gently crossed the last ridge he looked down again, noticing a familiar red-headed figure guiding his horse onto a wooded side path.

>"What are you up to Okita-san?" he mused as he watched his friend disappear amongst the trees.<p>

An uninvited thought came to him and Susumu felt his heart skip a beat.

>"No—" I shook his head. "It can't be." He pleaded as he waited for his friend to reappear from his leafy cover.
He waited, counted the seconds as his mind made irrational conclusions, _it couldn't be true_, Susumu felt disappointed in himself as he finally saw Okita's red hair emerge from the green blanket below, H ow far have I sunk that I'm even suspicious of my friends?_

Susumu recalled a conversation he had with Sannan-dono when he had been in Kyoto a few weeks earlier. There had been worry, Sannan-dono said that Okita was not acting his normal self.

Could this be the reason? Could Okita-san be a traitor? Was he leaving the enemy information as they travelled?

Susumu felt sick even considering the questions that now plagued his mind.

>He looked down to where Okita was, his mind troubled as he saw him veer off the path again.<p>

"I'll just keep track for a little while." He whispered as he started counting the seconds again, hoping that he was just being paranoid, pleading that he would find the reason for Okita's strange behavior.

14. Chapter 14 - Truths and Travel

Chapter 13

There are many ways that agents can receive orders, some methods much more dangerous than others.

>It came in her sleep, a soft whisper at first... a dream.
She did not realise what she heard and her mind shrugged off the tingling mutter, but as her consciousness became less muddled she woke with a

start.

This was a method only reserved for the most dire of situations, there were multiple, unimaginable dangers that came with using a mind connection. An urgency crawled in her gut.

_The enemy is approaching the eastern border of Aki. Two days..._the hollow voice fizzled, crackled and the single word _Haste_ was the last imprinted in her thoughts before it vanished.

Kasumi immediately knew what was needed. She moved instantly, ignoring her aching limbs and the dreadful stitch of her ribs, grabbing her already packed belongings, she raced to where the horses were kept, her earlier guilt erased by her urgency, the need to obey pulsing through her veins.

She chose the strongest horse and mounted it with a colourful selection of words as her injured arm brushed the saddle edge.

"Come boy, don't let me down." she urged as she nudged the horse into a trot and then a gallop.

_Two days...

>It echoed in her ears as she raced through the thick web of trees, small low-hanging branches smacking her in the face as she forced the horse under her to gallop once again.

Her face stung and bled, her cheeks cut in a hundred different places by sharp leaves and rough twigs, her tightly bound ribs howled with pain, her arm throbbing each time the horse's hooves hit the ground.

>She had reached a point where the pain was numbing her thoughts, she had not slept, eaten or even rested in hours, she moved forward mechanically, her only objective to reach the Aki Province before nightfall.<p>

/

The evening was darker than usual, Okita felt an ominous thickness to the air as he watched the sun drown below the horizon. So far he had managed to evade Hijikata and the rest of his friends, he felt their eyes on him during the day and knew that they were waiting for the opportunity to confront him. This knowledge made his already fiery chest pain even more intensely, fear of being found out running like a poison through his veins.

"At this rate I might die from a heart attack before we even reach Aki" he muttered as he took the saddle from his horse's back and threw it in the soft grass.

They were only a few hours' travel from their rendezvous, tension ran thick amongst the men, rumours about their opponents, that they might not even be human, fueling already smoldering fears.

Okita felt a new rush of coughs rising in his chest and he quickly made his way to the nearest bramble. The coughs came violently now and he could not suppress them, blood dripped from his mouth as he knelt in the low-lit dusk, fire in his chest incinerating his lungs and throat. To his own shame he could feel warm tears run down his cheeks, making the small breaths he could manage come in strained

hiccups.

Tears.

>They were not only from the physical pain that ravaged his body—he mourned his own confusion and worry, a silhouetted female figure still prominent in his thoughts.
"_All I wished for was to meet you, if only once." _ He thought, then shook his head knowing he was lying to himself. He wanted more than to meet her, he wanted to know her, touch her, hear her.

His heart sank even deeper into an dark, unknown abyss as he thought of his nameless, faceless infatuation, days have passed, maybe weeks since he had any sign of her, he had lost track of time as his condition had grown worse. To him, the only truth was that she had somehow left an empty space in his heart, her absence more painful than his expiring lungs.

A particularly ferocious cough burst from his lungs and left a momentary spray of red in the air, the droplets catching the last of the dying sun's rays, glistening rubies in the air.

"Okita-dono?" the voice came from the near dark evening.

>Okita looked up dizzily, the pain muddling his senses to a point that he could not recognize the voice.<p>

Susumu appeared, silently stepping from his hiding place between two trees.

>"Okita-dono?" he repeated, shock clearly written on his face.
"Susumu—." Coughs came tumbling from his mouth, fresh blood running over his chin. Susumu jumped to his side, immediately scanning his friend for wounds, when none were apparent he stepped back, staring at Okita in horror.

>"Oh Hachi." he swore, the words falling like lead to the ground, lying there for them both to digest.<p>

A deadly silence followed.

Slowly, Susumu knelt down next to his friend.

>"How long Okita-dono?"
Looking up, his eyes bloodshot and tired, Okita could not answer as another cough growled in his throat.

Susumu's mind skimmed through the last few months, at closer inspection, he swore at himself, the signs were there, silently he reprimanded himself for not noticing anything earlier.

>Okita's pale face, Okita excusing himself in mid conversation, Okita not having the strength he used to show, Okita's slumped, tired posture.
Understanding came to him like a hammer to his head. His friend Okita...was dying.

He had seen this disease before, the memory of his mother's pale face as she coughed her last breath still haunted him, a lone tear rolling down her sunken cheek, Susumu shuddered at the thought as he felt Okita break into a new bout of bloody coughs. A cold fear gripped his chest as he realised Okita's state and the fact that he, Susumu Yamazaki, could do nothing to help his friend.

A desperate "No" was all he could muster as he sat next to his ailing friend.

/

Exhausted, Kasumi fell to her knees at the bank of the small stream, water bottle in hand.

She had made good time and was close to her destination, with two hours until sunset she took some time to rest the horse and herself.

>She gingerly unbound her arm, just to let out a yelp of pain once the pressure of the bandage was gone, it was swollen, very swollen and Kasumi knew instantly that the extra strain had put the healing back with a couple of weeks.<p>

With a sting of loud swears, she carefully washed her arm before re-bandaging it. Sitting back to rest her tired body, her mind unwittingly wandered to a certain red headed samurai, her heart still dancing a butterfly-dance when she thought of him. Her hand moved to her satchel to make sure the two precious green vials were still where she had placed them, they were, and she let out a relieved sigh.

>"Even if I can't have your heartâ€|I can't sit idly and watch you suffer."<p>

Kasumi's lips curled into a bitter smile, the image of Asuka in his arms still causing more pain than she was comfortable with.

>"You are a stupid womanâ€|" she chided herself. "Nothing would ever have come of it, and now, you still carry his cure in your pocket."<p>

She let out a harsh smirk as she thought of her own romantic idiocy.

A distinct thud of a purposefully thrown rock sounded behind her. She turned to see a jagged clump between the green blades of summer grass, a dog-eared note wrapped around it.

>"One extreme to another, heh?" she chuckled as she picked up the crudely delivered message.
Her stiff fingers struggled to untie the twine fastening the note, after a minute her patience had run out and she pulled a tanto from her leg sheath, cutting the twine in a single motion. Glancing at the glyphs on the piece of paper, her orders were clear.

A campsite.

>Ranking Officers.
Kill.

>Tonight.<p>

"Easy enough." she shrugged as she slowly made her way back to her horse.

Even exhausted, she savoured the sensation of her blood simmering, the thought a of fight, a kill, bringing new life to her tired and broken body. She found that she had already checked all her weapons, already secured her armour, instinct and excitement taking over where her mind was too weary.

"Only two or three leagues left boy." She said to her nameless horse as she patted his neck, checking the bridle before lightly mounting, with a sharp flick of the reins she was off.

>Her heart racing with anticipation.
Her target close enough smell and taste in the air.

/

It was quiet around the campfire as Okita stared at the flames dancing to an unsung rhythm, mesmerized by the flicker and twists of the fire, he found himself taken back to the night of the festival and the acrobats dominating the sky like the flames before him.

He thought of the fallen Yuki Ona and wondered if she was recovering from her injuries, with these thoughts came a more urgent worry for another woman of mist, thoughts more painful as he felt his disappointed heart lurch, a lone cherry tree looming in the night sky, a hollow in his heart, the worry for an unknown woman plaguing him relentlessly.

He let out an uncomfortable cough as Hijikata entered the soft ring of light created by the fire.

>"Okita-san" Hijikata uttered his face painted with worry.
"Tori-san" Okita nodded nervously, feeling the tension radiating from Hijikata. He had been dreading this moment for months, facing his friends with the knowledge that they knew his fate and now, he had to explain why he had not said anything.

"Okita-san" are you still feeling unwell?" The question was loaded and Okita knew it.

>"I am better, thank you Hijikata-dono, although I am still not back to my normal self."<p>

An uncomfortable silence followed, neither of them knowing how to continue the conversation.

>Finally Hijikata puckered up the courage to speak.
"Have you seen the doctor yet?" he looked at Okita, who in turn was intently staring at the fire in front of him.

>"Yes." his voice was hollow, like someone not entirely there, deep in thought.
"Okita-san." Hijikata struggled with his own voice as he felt his emotions trying to clamber out of his chest. "Why? Why did you not tell anyone?"

Another silence came as Okita considered his friend's question.

>"Would I be sitting here, right now, if you had known?" Okita finally looked at Hijikata, desperation clear on his face.
Hijikata found he could not look his friend in the eye as he muttered "No"

"That's why." Okita said softly. "This is my life Tori-san." The quiver in his voice validating his truthfulness. "I know nothing else and you, even from the best of intentions, would have taken that away from me."

>Hijikata mulled over Okita's words before he spoke again.
"Can you fight?"

>Okita's expression instantly changed to that of surprise, taken aback by Hijikata's question.
"I think"

An uninvited hissing interrupted them, made them stop their discussion.

>It was the sound of a katana leaving its sheath. They looked at each other, they knew, it was only a brief moment before they both jumped to their feet, their weapons effortlessly appearing, as if by

magic.<p>

"Who's there? Show yourself!" Hijikata's voice rang clearly.
>No answer.
Then a single bloodthirsty cry came from the dark.

The enemy was upon them.

15. Chapter 15 - Battle and Steel

I don't own Hauouki or any of it's characters.****

* * *

><p>Chapter 14

Silenceâ€¦|

So tense that it covered the clearance like a thick winter blanket, the air toxic and heavy.

>Heisuke stood in a battle stance, feet ready to move, hands clutching his katana's worn hilt, the heat from Harada's body next to him beating nervously against his own.<p>

The enemy was in the forest, hiding in a leafy cloak of darkness, a strange putrid smell floated from the wall of infested trees looming before them, reminding Heisuke of Susumu's report and the creatures he had spoken of. As his gaze flitted towards Harada, he could see his friend holding the same thought, anticipation etched on his face, maybe even fear.

Waitingâ€¦|

They had been standing there, ready to strike, for what seemed hours, hearts drumming in their chests, blood rushing to their ears. As a single drop of sweat slowly crawled down the side of Heisuke's cheek, he wondered if the attack would ever start, thenâ€¦|

A glint.

Heisuke's eye caught the flicker and with a cat-like instinct he leapt sideways, a shuriken passing him with a mere inch. Crouching on the ground where he landed, he heard Harada's voice pierce the thick air.

>"Come out here and fight you cowards!"<p>

An answer came in a low rumble of growls.

>Moments later they spilled from the dark corners in the camp, growling, yelping, bloodthirsty eyes glowing like sickened embers of a dying flame.
Once they might have been human, but that was long lost, their hands now leathery claws, their feral grins dripping with poison.

Those claws raked the air, hunting for flesh. The fangs glistened in the moonlight, craving blood. They came in waves of rancid stench and chilling cries, murder the only thing on their minds.

Still, the Shinsengumi did not hesitate, Harada's spear crushing bones, Heisuke's blade slicing undead flesh, their bodies following

inborn movements honed for killing, their weapons singing the praises of the gods of war.

Heisuke could hear his men fight close by, heard their gruesome deaths as their bodies thudded to the ground, their cries as they were raked and bit.

>Here is where the elite and fortunate are chosen.
_The thought darted through his mind as he severed a head, the monster's last breath exhaling as a panicked cry, the thick fluid from it's veins spraying in a jerky arc.

Here we shall see our future.

Okita forgot.

As his blood surged, veins filling with battle lust, Okita forgot his painfully diseased lungs, he forgot that he had to explain himself to his friends. As the tension of a few moments ago evaporated in the night sky, he forgot about the woman that plagued every second of his thoughts, he forgot about the worry he held for her, in battle and blood he found a blissful emptiness, Okita smiled a bloodthirsty smile, a toothy grin that became larger with every second that the sky grew more bloodstained.

Without thought Okita and Hijikata covered each other's backs, turning to face whatever came from the dark recesses surrounding them. Two deadly katanas glinted in the fast dimming night sky, held by two deadly men, their attackers hesitated momentarily, plainly these men were different, far more capable, strong, fearsome.
>This knowledge only halted them for a few seconds, before they once again rushed forward.<p>

A step forward.

>A sweep of his blade.
Hijikata had killed the first beast without any effort, casually returning to his guarded position next to his friend.

First blood seemed to open a floodgate, and the darkness suddenly came alive with writhing limbs, claws and fangs, devilish cries echoing from hundreds of thirsty throats.

Not far off, the sound of others battling for their lives could be heard, the clear echo of weapons clashing and orders shouted ringing in Okita's ears, it only served to excite the Shinsengumi even more.

>They were ready and a flurry of blades met the attacking chaos.<p>

The two men performed an unpracticed but meticulous sequence of attacks, a dance of blades arching beautifully in the night sky, painting what little light was left with wet, red streaks.

Strike. Cut. Slice.

>The night cried crimson tears.<p>

"There are humans!" Hijikata shouted as he severed a limb off something not undead or mutated, the clatter of a blade and the spray of berry coloured liquid accompanying the now useless piece of flesh.

>Okita scanned the sea of contorted faces, noting where the more

human-like eyes where, he glanced at Hijikata and gave a slight nod. They moved in unison, their deadly dance starting with the graceful twin-sweep of two razor-like katanas. Their targets were the humans and they carved a bloody path to find them.<p>

Kasumi sat watching the carnage from her hiding spot, frustrated as her body begged to join the battle, even her injured arm twitched in anticipation, pain all but lost in the coiled muscles of her body.

Only a few meters from her perch, blades were hissing and claws were scratching, blood and ooze already covering the once green grass. Men and monsters died as she drew her Wakizashi from it's sheath, the hissing blade momentarily catching the moonlight, she looked down at the metal her brow furrowing as her mind left the battlefield for an instant.

She had been surprised when she saw Sanosuke Harada and Heisuke Toudou caught in the middle of battle.

>She had not expected to see the Shinsengumi here and her thoughts immediately turned to her red-haired obsession. Her eyes darted from one face to another, when she could not find him, she felt both relieved and disappointed. She would not have to face him, which made her release a soft sigh, but a worry also crept into her mind.<p>

Why was he not here? She felt a flutter of worry in her chest, a fear she could not describe.

>Her mind raced through possible answers as she stared down at the battle before her.<p>

Sumi, focus! She berated herself as another Shinsengumi died before her eyes, his blood pooling under him like a newly hatched butterfly's wings.

She would have to wait for answers. Her orders were clear, wait until the third wave of attacks.

Death came swiftly for most of these sad husks, their putrid blood already coating the ground in an odd colour of green.

>Hijikata noticed the smell immediately and tried to warn Okita to stay out of the gory mess, but as he looked up, he realised that Okita was not there, transfixed by blade and blood, he was lost in a world of bloodlust.<p>

Okita barrelled through the enemy forces, not nearly as composed as usual, he hacked and slashed, his face contorted in a grimace of plain frenzy, even releasing a sick laugh on occasion. He wasn't covering himself and Hijikata had to scramble to cover his friend's obvious unguarded attacks.

Hijikata looked on as his friend became a monster himself, a new fear growing in his chest as he saw a man that didn't fight to live, but a man that fought to die.

Heisuke was out of breath, his limbs tired and numb.

>He looked over to where Harada was dealing with the last of the creatures, their dying shrieks echoing off into the distance.
He sighed, he needed rest. His eyes were heavy as he closed them for a moment.

He heard Harada limping towards him, opening his eyes he saw blood running down Harada's leg in thin rivulets.
>"Are you okay?" Harada uttered.
Heisuke nodded, his breath coming too quickly for him to answer.
>"I think one of them bit me." Harada complained looking down at his blood soaked pants.
"Youâ€|betterâ€|haveâ€|thatâ€|lookedâ€|."

Heisuke's broken sentence was interrupted by another shriek coming from the trees, as he looked up, he saw more creatures materialising from the darkness.
>"Fuck" was all he heard from Harada as he slowly heaved his body up, katana swaying in his hands.<p>

_Will this ever end? _Was his last thought before he sliced through the first of the new wave of creatures, his own strength betraying him as he only nicked his attacker.

They were everywhere, a wave of deadly chaos overwhelmed the Shinsengumi and the remainder of their forces. The creatures knew they had the upper hand and fought with a new vigour.

Kasumi saw her cue, a red flicker in the distance, and jumped off the her perch to hit the ground running, her Wakizashi sliced through the night sky as she ran to meet the enemy, the tension releasing from her body the moment her blade hit flesh.

Heisuke saw his own death, he expected every breath to be his last.

>He could not lift his arms anymore, his feet only moving slightly in the body strewn clearing. He could see his death approaching in the form of a particularly large mutated mess, he was ready, his body spent.<p>

He gathered his last strength, lifted his katana for the last time, he would not go down without at least hurting this beast.

It came towards him, clearly set on being his executioner, the beast stopped a few steps away, glaring at Heisuke with intent, blood and bile dripping from it's long fangs. Heisuke inhaled deeply, his last breath and used his last strength to vault forward into the huge creature's chest, his katana extended to puncture the things' heart.

He hit in full force, hearing his own voice crackle a desperate chortle.

>The body before him crumpled as he collided with it, like a ragdoll it fell to the ground, Heisuke landing on top of the foul-smelling mess with a thud.<p>

Darkness, Numbness.

>Is this death? Am I dead?
_Heisuke's mind raced, he couldn't move, his body reaching it's limit with his last desperate leap, everything around him was dark.

I must be dead. Panic set in, his now lifeless heart seemingly thumping in his chest, his mind screaming.

A sound penetrated his skull, someone was calling his name. He knew

that voice.

>Painstakingly he pried open his eyes, something he had thought he lost mere seconds ago.<p>

"Susumu?" he murmured.

>"Thank the gods." Susumu's voice rang in his head. "I thought I misjudgedâ€|I thought we were too late." the relief in Susumu's voice softly flowed over Heisuke, bringing stinging tears to his eyes.<p>

Heisuke Toudou was not ready to die.

End
file.